

The ride home from Kings Cross Station had been a silent one, the threat of Moody and Arthur Weasley had actually penetrated even Vernon Dursley's stubborn mind and he had quickly come to decide that harassing Harry simply wasn't worth the trouble in would get him into, so he said nothing to Harry on the ride back to Little Whinging. Petunia Dursley was lost in her own thoughts as well, having seen the haunted look on Harry's face, she knew something bad must have happened. So each in their own way (Dudley was not along for the trip) decided to make the best of the situation and not invite more trouble upon themselves by abusing Harry.

Harry Potter sat in his bedroom at Number 4 Privet Drive and thought, something he had been doing quite a bit of in the 2 weeks since the Department of Mysteries and the death of Sirius Black. It had occurred to Harry on that drive home how little thought he'd actually given to his future. When he had done his career counseling session with Professor McGonagall he had pretty much plucked the idea of being an Auror out of thin air, thinking it would be a cool job to have, but he hadn't really considered it beforehand. Then there was the Prophecy to consider, Harry wasn't sure that he believed it, though he acknowledged Dumbledore's apparent faith in it. Harry found it difficult to believe anything Trelawney said as gospel, particularly something like this. That said, it explained a lot of Dumbledore's behavior over the years, such as placing Harry with the Dursleys.

Upon arriving at his "home" Harry had written a form letter to most of his friends asking them to leave him alone for a couple of weeks, so he could have time to sort things out and grieve. Harry didn't actually expect them to respect his wishes, and he was right, letters had come full bore starting the next day. Typical of them was Hermione's letter:

Dear Harry,

How are you? I know you must be hurting about Sirius, but you need to find a way to move on and live your life, that's what Sirius would want, and you know that. I hope you're practicing your Occlumency, you don't want anything like that to happen again, be sure to tell Dumbledore if your scar starts hurting again. If something happens please tell me, you know I want to help you.

With love,

Hermione

Not for the first time Harry wondered if Hermione was informing on him to Dumbledore, and for how long. Hermione was one of his best friends, and truth be told she had probably been a better friend to him over the years than Ron had, but her devotion to authority bordered on the frightening. Somehow the old man always seemed to know what he was up to, so Dumbledore either had some good surveillance charms working in Gryffindor tower, or he had someone on the inside.

Harry's feelings about Dumbledore had gradually shifted over the weeks as well. Dumbledore had amazingly enough respected Harry's request for quiet, though he knew it wouldn't last. The problem was, the more Harry took stock of his life, both at Privet Drive and at Hogwarts, the more dissatisfied he grew with it. The difficulties at Privet were obvious, a lack of anything resembling affection , and oftentimes a lack of food as well. Harry wondered what kind of threat Dumbledore had over Aunt Petunia to keep taking him back summer after summer, though next summer was supposed to his last there, since on his 17th birthday he would become of age in the wizarding world and be outside Dumbledore's authority, in the summer anyway. He had a sneaking suspicion though that the old man wouldn't let that get in his way and would find a way to confine him somehow, perhaps at Grimmaud Place.

His life at Hogwarts was what really gave Harry pause, once he really thought about it. Harry knew he hadn't made that many friends in his 5 years there, but after he examined it he was shocked at how few there really were. Really his circle was limited to those who had gone with him to the DOM (Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna), and though he had friendly relations with Dean and Seamus (his other roommates), he was a bit sad to realize there was no one else. Harry knew that a lot of this was due to being "The Boy Who Lived", people either wound up star-struck like Colin Creevey, or disliked him because of it, not taking any time to get to know him. Harry also acknowledged that some of it was due to Ron and Hermione, not the 2 most popular people in Gryffindor tower. Hermione's bossiness and

academic mania grated on most of their housemates (Harry could only wonder what most Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs thought of her, what the Slytherins thought didn't need much effort on his part), and Ron.....The fact was, Ron wasn't a very bright wizard and tended to be a Gryffindor version of Draco Malfoy, very judgmental about those who did not fit his own ideals. The three of them had been so close for so long, that though others might have liked Harry, they just didn't want to deal with Ron and Hermione on a regular basis.

Each summer since he had been a wizard, Harry had had Hogwarts and his memories of it to hold on to, but the more he thought about it, the less he wanted to return to Hogwarts. Harry knew that he needed to make some plans, plans that couldn't done alone.

Dear Mrs. Longbottom,

I know we've never met before ma'am, but I'm a roommate at Hogwarts of your grandson Neville. First I'd like to say that I'm sorry that Neville got involved in the Department of Mysteries incident that I led, but you should know that he fought very well and I'm proud to call him my friend and ally. I'm writing to you because I need some advice, and I know from Neville about your knowledge and integrity. I need to hire a wizarding solicitor, hopefully one who has some knowledge of muggle law as well, and I was hoping there was one you could recommend to me. I have some issues that I need to take care of and I need that kind of help. I'm asking you and not someone at Hogwarts ma'am, because to be honest I don't want to hire someone under their control or influence, so I can get impartial advice.

I would appreciate any help you could give me, please give my best to Neville

Harry Potter

"Here you go Hedwig, please see if Mrs. Longbottom will reply right away, and if so wait for it, ok girl?"

Hedwig gave a dignified hoot, as if Harry didn't know how to deliver mail 'let the expert handle it' she seemed to say.

Harry wasn't sure if this was the right course of action to take, but he thought that to do what he was thinking of, he would need legal advice, advice that he couldn't trust the Order to give him. There was certainly no harm in asking Mrs. Longbottom, as he didn't think she was an order member, and figured that Neville had likely spoken well of him over the years to her.

For lack of anything else to do in the meantime, Harry started in on his exercises. He was up, after 2 weeks, to 200 sit-ups a day, as well as 50 push-ups. Certainly not Olympic worthy, but much better than he could do when he started. Harry had been surprised at how out of shape he was, considering how skinny he still looked, even after 10 months of Hogwarts food and more than a couple of chocolate frogs. Plus, it helped kill the time, truth be told, Harry was a bit nervous

about going outside the house, given what had happened last summer with the Dementors. He wasn't positive that the Order was watching Privet Drive, but he assumed that someone was on guard (hopefully not Dung).

After he finished with his exercises, he wandered downstairs to get a glass of water:

"Hello Aunt Petunia."

His Aunt looked at him and nodded, though not unpleasantly. Relations with her had been better than ever since he got back, though that wasn't saying too much. She and Vernon both looked like they were fighting some kind of inner battle while they ate dinner with Harry, the only extended times they were in his presence. Vernon's battle was reconciling 15 years of verbal abuse and threats, with the certainty of 'freaks' coming into his home and doing things to him. Petunia alternately looked nervous and sad when she was around Harry, as if seeing more and more of Lily in him, and remembering her fate and why he had landed with them in the first place. Harry hadn't seen Dudley more than once or twice since he'd been back, which relieved him somewhat. Dudley had gotten a summer job at a local cinema and was rarely home, and seemed bent on avoiding Harry when he was. Harry had been fairly worried about seeing Dudley again after the Dementor incident last summer, and what he might do to Harry if he still blamed him for it. Dudley's thoughts remained his own however.

In the back of his mind, Harry knew that if he wanted some legal freedom, he would need the cooperation of Vernon and Petunia. He knew that they were his muggle guardians of course, and he was fairly certain that they were in the wizarding world as well. The only alternative to them had been Sirius, who between Azkaban and being hiding after his escape, had never been in a position to claim guardianship. The question was, how to get this cooperation? He knew that Vernon was the key, since Petunia would follow his lead. He could, of course, bribe them, but he shuddered at the thought of Vernon learning how much money he had in Gringotts, he knew his uncle's aversion to wizards wouldn't extend to money.

Physical threats were another possibility, but Harry was loathe to go that route. He wasn't worried about whether he could do it or not, in fact he rather liked the idea of hurting Vernon, in the abstract anyway. For a few years time Harry had been occasionally daydreaming about his own 17th birthday present to himself , which involved a couple of hours fun with his wand and the Dursleys. The problem was, he couldn't rely on the fact that Vernon hadn't thought of this as well, and might decide to do a pre-emptive strike. Vernon Dursley was a blustery sort of man to those who didn't know him well, but Harry knew him very well and knew that hatred might make Vernon do things that both he and Harry would regret.....if Harry was alive to regret them.

One thing was certain, he couldn't dare let Dumbledore learn that he was planning any of this. Harry's distrust of the Order wasn't simply resentment of Dumbledore, and all of the half-truths, lies, and evasions that the Headmaster had been feeding him all of these years. In a perverse way he rather admired the quite Slytherin way that Dumbledore operated (in his 3rd year he had asked McGonagall what House that Dumbledore had been in, she had replied icily that it was none of his business, so he assumed it was Slytherin).....at least he would have admired it if it had happened to someone else. Harry didn't trust Dumbledore at all with his future, given what he had done and not done. Harry still had trouble believing that the blood protection at Privet Drive was the only way to protect him, particularly from a wizard who went without a body for 13 years. Hearing the Prophecy only made his resentment of Dumbledore worse, "It would have been nice to have some warning, or perhaps even a bit of formal training." Harry knew that his only real training had been his haphazard adventures, where he more or less learned how to defend himself on his own, with the exception of Remus and his Patronus.

Snape, there was another reason to be suspicious of Dumbledore. The old man had to know how much Snape hated Harry's guts, yet he forced them together time and again. Harry hated Snape with equal venom, and he felt that Sirius would be alive if not for Snape's need to settle old scores. Harry had never forgiven Snape for interfering during 3rd year, giving Peter Pettigrew time to escape, denying Sirius his chance at freedom.

As for the rest of the Order, Harry liked them enough as people, but like with Hermione he was wary of their blind loyalty to Dumbledore. Harry knew that what he was thinking of doing would not go over at all with Dumbledore, and he would use the Order to stop him.

Remus was another sticky point, Harry knew with Sirius gone that Remus was his last true link to his parents and their life.....but that was the problem, Remus had never been terribly forthcoming about what his parents really were like, nor had Sirius been. It had not gone unnoticed by Harry that he had learned more about his dad from Snape's pensieve than from his dad's best friends. Harry also had come to resent Remus in part for his imprisonment on Privet Drive over the years, at the very least Remus could have come and checked on him every once in awhile, perhaps putting some fear into the Dursleys to get him some better treatment. But no, Harry had never so much as heard of Remus until he was 13, and that grated on him more and more. There also was the practical aspect of Remus needing Dumbledore much more than the other way 'round, that alone would have put Remus' loyalty into question.

Harry never even considered asking most of the Weasleys for help, he had seen the way Molly Weasley tried to baby her sons and try not to let them make any decisions for themselves, and while he was grateful that she considered him an unofficial 8th child, he felt certain that she would be even worse with him. Mr. Weasley was a kindly man that was much sharper than he was perhaps given credit for (since he had gotten to know Luna, Harry had very privately considered her and Mr. Weasley to be 2 peas in a pod), but Harry knew who ruled that household. Bill and Charlie were relative unknowns to him, and Percy didn't even bear thinking about. Fred and George were possibilities, he knew that they genuinely cared about him and would look out for him if he needed it, but he didn't want them crossing their parents and getting any flack. He filed away the idea though, for later. Ginny, ironically, was the Weasley he trusted least (after Percy). Harry knew that her crush had receded somewhat over the last year, but it still made him uncomfortable to consider trusting her. If anything, she was the female equivalent of Colin Creevey, liking him for his fame without really knowing him.

Ron.....Ron was his best mate, but Harry knew that Ron would tell Hermione everything. Harry wasn't sure to this day if those two had become anything more than friends over the past year. It wouldn't surprise him if they had, though he would be disappointed if they'd kept it from him. Harry couldn't understand Ron's apparent romantic feelings for Hermione, she was attractive he supposed, in a no-nonsense way, but entirely too controlling. Harry himself wanted a girlfriend, not a boss. As it was he had been hard pressed over the past year to keep his growing irritation with Hermione to himself. He still liked them both, and knew that they only wanted what was best for him, but given his suspicions of Hermione and what she might tell their teachers, he simply couldn't risk giving anything away to Ron.

Not that he had anything to give away at this point yet, the plan was still only a vague one in his mind about getting some more freedom. Harry knew what the concept of legal emancipation was, and surmised that without Dumbledore's coercion, the Dursleys might have suggested it themselves this year, when he turned 16.

Luna Lovegood was the one person he actually had corresponded with, he had specifically not included her in his 'leave me alone' letters at the beginning of the summer. They didn't talk about the DOM, but had just taken some time to get to know each other through letters, as in school they were in different years and different Houses (Harry had never had a class with any Ravenclaw in his own year). Harry wasn't quite ready to fill her in on his plans, but he always smiled when he read her letters.....which were more like streams of consciousness than anything structured, but he enjoyed them as a nice diversion from his troubles.

When Harry wrote to Neville's grandmother he knew that to a point he was having to trust Neville a bit, but wasn't too worried. Neville had always kind of been the odd one out in their year, with Ron and Harry teaming up, and Seamus and Dean being close. Harry knew that Neville's confidence has risen as a result of their DA work, as well as what happened in the DOM. When Harry analyzed the events in his mind, in muggle video fashion, he was surprised to learn that Neville had put up the best fight after himself. Harry knew that he was responsible for a lot of Neville's new found abilities and felt assured that Neville would be grateful enough not to rat him out.

So who to trust? Harry trusted his friends, and most of the Order to a point.....but there was trust and there was trust, and Harry was beginning to learn the difference.

Wednesday, July 18th, 1996

Dear Dobby,

I was wondering if you would want to work for me? I don't need a lot of looking after, but I could use certain of your skills in my life right now. I realize that you probably like working at Hogwarts with all those people, and you might not want to move, but I hope you will think about this. As for money, I'll double what you make now at Hogwarts and you can wear whatever you clothes you choose to.

If you would like to talk with me about it, just come visit Privet Drive, but please oh please just pop right into my bedroom, my aunt and uncle would probably have a seizure if they saw you.

Thank you Dobby,

Harry Potter

This was somewhat risky, having the excitable house elf around him while in the muggle world, but Harry felt that the benefits far outweighed the risk. Harry was by no means confident of the Order being able to protect him if the Death Eaters launched a concerted raid on Privet Drive; after all they had missed two Dementors the previous summer. Having watched Dobby in action against Lucious Malfoy after his 2nd year, he felt confident that at least Dobby could hold them off him while waiting for help. Harry knew that if he was forced to use his wand before he was allowed that the result might be similar to last summer, a trial where he was by no means confident of winning, particularly without Dumbledore's willing support. Dobby being around negated that risk thankfully, all he had to do was keep him away from the Dursleys.....though now that he thought about it, Uncle Vernon might not be so volatile with Dobby available to banish him into a wall if he attacked Harry.

Hedwig had just come back with Mrs. Longbottom's answer:

Dear Mr. Potter,

That was quite a nice display of flattery in your letter, a bit too obvious maybe, but I take it in the spirit in which it was offered. First, I would like to thank you for the influence you've had on Neville, I did in fact notice the change in him since last summer, a hint of it even showed during the Winter Holidays. His father Frank (a friend of your parents I should add) was a late bloomer as well and I'm relieved to see that Neville has turned a corner.

As for your request, I found it interesting and quite practical. From what Neville has told me you grew up not even knowing of our world and probably do need some guidance in technical matters. Much of this you should have gotten in your History of Magic class, but if Binns is anything dead like he was alive, I'm sure you sleep through most of his classes.

The solicitor I use is wizard named Peter Tyson, he has an office in Diagon Alley near Quality Quidditch Supplies. He is very well versed in wizarding law; he handles all of my matters, as well as having a working knowledge of muggle law. If your intention is to gain some sort of legal emancipation Harry's jaw dropped when he saw that she had figured it out so easily he is the right man for the task. Get control of yourself Mr. Potter, it was very apparent what you wanted a solicitor for, particularly when you wanted someone outside of Dumbledore's sphere of influence, which Mr. Tyson is (like most solicitors he was a Ravenclaw).

I must say I am impressed that you are willing to go through proper channels to obtain your freedom Mr. Potter, and thus I am perfectly willing to keep this matter to myself. I did tell Neville what your letter asked for, but I will not reveal to him what I told you, though he figured out your purpose on his own. Do be careful young man, I am sure that you are aware that you are the most polarizing figure in our little world here; all eyes are forever on you.

I wish you well,

Nora Longbottom

Harry took out his letter to Dobby and asked Hedwig, "You up to another trip girl? To Hogwarts this time?" Hedwig hadn't had much

else to do for 2 weeks and gave a nod. "This goes to Dobby the house elf, he should be in the Hogwarts kitchens somewhere. You don't need to wait for a reply, he should be coming here. You remember who he is?" Hedwig rolled her eyes as she remembered all too well who Dobby was. Harry snickered and sent her on her way.

No sooner had Hedwig gotten out of the window than a large brown owl came through the window with a letter for Harry. Harry paused before opening it, listening for any reaction from downstairs if they had noticed an owl coming in during the daytime. There was no sound however, so Aunt Petunia either hadn't seen it, or chose not to say anything. Petunia's quiet around him had vaguely bothered him the last few days. Harry didn't especially want to be shouted at, but as with most people, anything that deviated from a long standing routine tended to be noticeable. The brown owl went right for Hedwig's water dish and food bowl, so it appeared as if a reply would be waited for.

There were 2 letters in the bundle, one from Remus Lupin, and one from Albus Dumbledore. Harry chose to read Remus' first

Dear Harry,

How are you doing Harry? It's been a couple of weeks since we talked and I'm sure you're still hurting over Sirius, I know I am. You didn't get him killed Harry, Sirius knew what the risks were a long time ago and he accepted that this might happen. You made him very happy by being in his life Harry, you gave him hope at a time when he had none, and for that I know I thank you.

On another subject, Sirius left a will that must be read and gone over. You, Tonks, and I are the beneficiaries, though I don't know yet which of us got what. Sirius was the official Heir of the House of Black, his mother died before she got around to changing her will (she died in an explosion in case no one told you, she was caught in Diagon Alley during an attack while we were all students at Hogwarts, in our 7th year if I recall it correctly). The will can be read anytime we are all able to get together; it is to be done at the Trusts Department at Gringotts. Dumbledore is not happy about the idea of you leaving

your relatives right now, so it might have to wait a few weeks, but we will get it done.

I would like to come visit you soon; I don't want to come unannounced for fear of making things worse with your relatives, who I hope are treating you better. I would imagine our words to them had some effect, though I should tell you that Dumbledore didn't like it that we threatened them and made it clear that we were to harm them only in an emergency. Let me know via Hedwig when I can come see you, talk to you soon.

Moony

With this letter all of Harry's concerns about Remus were validated, the man was just too close to, or afraid of, Dumbledore to be any help to him. Plus the part about the threats, and the Order not willing to act on them enraged Harry; he only prayed that Vernon wouldn't put it to the test. The paragraph about blaming himself over Sirius' death he ignored once he had read it once, Harry didn't blame himself for what happened, he blamed Dumbledore and the Death Eaters themselves. Harry knew he had been duped by Voldemort, and was actually a bit proud over how he and the 5 student who he had more or less trained fought 12 Death Eaters to a draw.

If Snape hadn't done such a half-baked job of 'teaching' him Occlumency, he might not have bitten for the fake.....let alone him actually being told why he needed Occlumency in the first place. Harry could reasonably understand why Dumbledore had been unwilling to teach him, he certainly didn't want Dumbledore's memories available for Voldemort to download either, but the old man should have kept Snape on some kind of leash. Dumbledore's forgiveness for every one of Snape's peculiarities was mystifying to Harry, he wondered if there was some kind of family connection between the two. Surely Dumbledore didn't need a spy that badly did he? Particularly one so unpopular in the wizarding community, many of whom had either suffered through Potions at his hands, or listened to younger relatives' complaints about him.

Harry braced himself for Dumbledore's note, knowing that he wouldn't like what was in it.

Dear Harry,

I hope you are having a relaxing summer holiday so far. I have not had any notes from you about pain in your scar, so if that really is the case then I am very encouraged, Voldemort must be laying low after you and your colleagues routed his forces last month. Still, I do not expect this quiet to last, and I am afraid that we must restart your Occlumency lessons again. I'm sorry to tell you that again you must have them with Professor Snape, since my reasons for not be able to do them with you are still in effect. I have spoken with Professor Snape and he has promised me that he will try to put his issues with you aside so that the lessons will succeed this time. I also must insist upon a more concentrated effort from you to learn Occlumency quickly, as I expect our enemies to be very active in the near future. Professor Snape is currently away at a conference in Canada for Potions scholars, and will be back next week; he will be coming to Privet Drive a week from this coming Friday, July 27th

We will remove you from your relative sometime in early August, probably to Grimmaud Place, as The Burrow is too well known to hide you out there. Your OWL results are scheduled to be mailed at the start of next week, you should have them either Monday or Tuesday, I'm confident you did well on them.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to owl me,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry had never hated Dumbledore more than after he read this letter, any hesitation he might have had about his planned course of action disappeared. Harry did not like one bit being a virtual prisoner in this house, especially this house. Far from a gilded jail cell, he felt anything would have been better than this, and now he was stuck here for another 3 weeks at least, he had been hoping to be sprung for his birthday. He wanted no part of Snape in this house, particularly with no other wizards around to stop his potential excesses. Harry knew that Dumbledore trusted Snape implicitly, but he did not share that trust, and knew that Snape was very capable of harming him if the spirit moved him.

Harming him wasn't the only concern, but taking him.....Harry assumed that Voldemort had some sort of price on his head, and that the Death Eater who delivered him would never need worry about his future within the Dark Side, certainly Barty Crouch Jr. had been counting on that after the Triwizard Tournament. Temptation is an awful thing for a man, especially one with no true ties to the light side, which described Snape quite well.

Harry was glad that he had 9 days to figure out how to get rid of Snape, and he hoped more than ever that he could convince Dobby to come work for him. Having a house-elf for a bodyguard might seem a bit ridiculous, but Harry wondered at the willingness of whatever outside guards the Order had watching him to interfere with Snape, who everyone in the Order knew was Dumbledore's special aide.

The brown owl hooted loudly, Harry looked up and took the hint that he should reply to his letters:

Dear Remus,

Things are fine here; there haven't been any issues with my relatives. The threats worked on Vernon apparently, and I haven't seen Dudley more than twice this whole time. I must tell you that it pissed me off to know that your threats were hollow Remus, I have to tell you that I'm disappointed in you that you would be unwilling to stick up for me if it came to it. I know the Order is watching the house and I fully expect them to interfere if they hear me screaming in pain, Dumbledore or not.

I don't want to talk about Sirius right now Remus, except to tell you that I don't blame myself for his death. This is a war, and I'm all too aware that there are casualties. I miss him, and will always treasure the brief time we had with each other.

I am ready to hear Sirius' will at any point this summer, I know you need to wait for me to get out of jail, so I hope you and Tonks don't need the money too badly and can hold tight. I'm not ready to confide and confess to anyone right now Remus, so it would be best if we

hold off any visit by you for the time being. If it makes any difference to you, I'm not ready to open up to anyone in my circle yet, it's not just you.

Be good,

Harry

Harry read this over, and realized he was being a bit snotty to Remus, but he still wasn't in a good mood and decided that Remus would have to suffer a bit. Harry needed some more information before he wrote to Dumbledore, so he decided to wait on that for another day. He sent his letter off with the brown owl and went to take a shower.

When he got back, there was a very happy looking house-elf sitting on his bed, deja-vu all over again.....

Author's Note: I want to thank Gabwr, Skittles-07, and Fangfoot for being my first3 reviews, it was a pleasant moment to know that someone had taken the time to read my story.

“Hello Harry Potter!!” “Dobby is so happy to see you!” Indeed Harry had never seen the house-elf so happy, and that was saying something. Harry was relieved to note that Dobby did at least keep his voice down.

“I’m glad you came Dobby, I take it you got my letter?”

“Yes Harry Potter, I got your letter a few minutes ago, I was so happy to get a letter from the most bestest wizard ever.”

“Well let’s not go that far Dobby, but I’m glad Hedwig got there ok. She’s flying back now?”

“Oh yes Harry Potter, she took a drink of water and flew off right away.”

“So what do you think about my offer Dobby? Are you interested in working for me?”

“Of course Harry Potter, all you ever had to do was ask me. You would like me to be your house-elf at Hogwarts Harry Potter?”

“Dobby, please call me Harry, not Harry Potter.....before I say anything else Dobby, I need to know that you will keep my secrets, some of the things I’m about to do will not be very popular.”

Dobby went a color that Harry supposed was pale on a house-elf, which clued Harry into what must be running through the little elf’s mind.

“Oh no Dobby, I won’t be doing anything dark or evil, I promise. I just want some more freedom is all, and there are many, including Dumbledore, who don’t think that it’s a good idea for me to have any.”

Dobby looked relieved at that, “Of course Harry Pot....of course Harry, a house-elf is bound to keep his master’s secrets.”

“Ok Dobby, first things first, don’t ever call me master.” Harry held up a hand to forestall Dobby’s objections. “Yes I know I technically will

be your master, but I'm uncomfortable with being called that, please respect my wishes on that."

Dobby looked a bit dubious, but nodded all the same.

"So you're hired then, I'll pay you 50 galleons a month, with time off to be decided later. You won't have much to do in all reality, it will be 2 years before I have a house of my own, so you will just be helping me here, and at school."

"Dobby is pleased that Harry Potter is thinking about his future, and is proud to be his house-elf. I accept the position."

"Great Dobby, now here's the thing.....I....err, I mean we, might not be returning to Hogwarts. In fact we might be leaving Great Britain altogether."

Here it was, his private plan out in the open for the first time.....and confided in first to a house-elf of all things. Harry loved irony as much as the next young man, but this stretched even his limits. Still, he knew that Dobby was safe, even if any advice he gave wouldn't be worth much.

Dobby was stunned speechless, but he rallied and asked Harry if he was serious.

"I'm very serious Dobby. I'm not entirely sure I can bring it off this quickly, so it might not happen until next year. It is something I've been thinking a lot about Dobby, and at the very least I want to put the pieces in place. What I would like from you in the next few weeks is to be a sounding board for me, even if you're not sure what I'm talking about it will do me good to get my thoughts out in the open."

It was just then that Harry realized that the Order might have listening charms on the house. His stomach went queasy, but there was nothing he could do now if the cat was out of the bag. He went to the window and looked outside, but saw nothing unusual. He collected his thoughts and turned back to Dobby.

"Well Dobby, what do you say? Are you with me?"

"Harry does not even need to ask, of course Dobby is with you.....but there is one thing Harry, Dobby is not quite sure how to say it."

"Go on Dobby, you can tell me anything," Harry said, thinking it had to do with Dumbledore.

"Well Harry, you see.....ummm.....well this is very embarrassing, but Dobby and Winky have become very close....." he trailed off, blushing furiously.

Harry was exploding with laughter on the inside, but he kept his face to a smile.

"I take it then Dobby that you do not want to be parted from Winky if possible?"

"Yes Harry Potter.....err, sorry...I mean yes Harry."

"Do you think that she would want to join you here with me?"

"Oh yes, I showed her your letter and already asked her, she would most like to leave Hogwarts to be a proper house-elf again. She would not need paying, just work is enough for her."

"Well Dobby of course Winky would be welcome to join us, but like I said, there won't be much work for even one house-elf, let alone 2. I cannot have my Aunt and Uncle know that you are here if possible, at least not living here."

"It is ok Harry, Dobby and Winky will do what is necessary to protect and serve you."

"Thank you Dobby, I will rely on you for that. Now all we have to do is find a place for you to sleep at night."

"Oh that is easy Harry, Dobby and Winky can use the clothes closet, we can make 'changes' to it so it will not be too small. Harry's Aunt

and Uncle will not notice us being here if Harry does not want them to.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, this was going much easier than he'd had any right to expect.

“Ok Dobby, come back tomorrow with Winky, and please make sure that Dumbledore does not know where you are going. Just tell him that you found a wizard family to look after and that you and Winky are going. I’m sure 2 house-elves won’t be missed at such a big place as Hogwarts.”

“Ok Harry, we will be seeing you tomorrow.”

“Thank you Dobby, I’m glad that you are going to be joining me.”

Dobby grinned happily and looked like he was about to leave.

“Oh yeah Dobby, one more thing. I know you can read since you answered my letter, but can you write as well?”

“Oh yes Harry, Dobby can write, Winky can as well.”

“Great Dobby, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye Harry.”

Well that went well Harry thought.....except for the possibility of listening charms, Harry wanted to scream when he thought of how Order members might be ratting him out to that old control freak even now. He decided to hold off writing to Peter Tyson (the solicitor) until tomorrow, by then Hedwig should be back and rested, and the listening charm issue settled one way or another.

Meanwhile, at Grimmaud Place

Remus Lupin paced around the living room, re-reading Harry’s letter over and over in his mind. The letter bothered him on many levels, not the least of which was an easily detectable veneer of hostility toward him. Remus’ first instinct was to go to Privet Drive immediately, even

though the letter had expressly told him not to. He was stopped however, by the realization that it would only drive Harry further away from him, since so many of the adults in his life seemed not to care about Harry's wishes. Remus had never been sure of how to talk with Harry, every time he looked at Harry he was reminded of James and Lily. Sirius got past that by basically talking to Harry as he would have talked to James, being more Harry's friend than his mentor. Remus couldn't help but think of Harry as his student, and tried for more of an uncle role....a role that he wished Sirius had taken on. Then again, Remus had had many more years to deal with James and Lily being dead than Sirius had, and it had undoubtedly altered the way he looked at it.

Remus was aware of Harry's distaste for his relatives, and had argued with Dumbledore privately until he was blue in the face, but the Headmaster had been adamant that Harry go back there for at least a month, to renew the blood protections. Remus was one of the few Order members who had known about why exactly Harry needed to go back to Privet Drive (Snape and McGonagall were the others Dumbledore had shared this with), and while he accepted Dumbledore's assurance that Harry would be safe, he thought that Dumbledore was just being lazy in not trying to find a more comfortable spot for Harry.

He still had a rough time accepting that Sirius was gone, every morning he expected to come down the stairs and see Sirius at breakfast, only to be shaken slightly at the emptiness. Remus had led a hard life up until now, but all his Marauder friends were dead.....and Remus quite considered Peter Pettigrew to be dead in all but body.....and he was alone. Remus had often thought of leaving Britain to try for a new life elsewhere, but he remained, bent on bringing down Voldemort, to avenge his friends. Remus did not know the exact contents of the Prophecy, but like so many others he could imagine what it said. He knew that Dumbledore had finally told Harry what the Prophecy entailed, but not of Harry's reaction to it.....though he could easily surmise it.

After thinking on it for a bit, Remus decided to leave Harry alone for now, if that's what he wanted. Sometimes teenagers just needed some time to deal with their issues, and while Harry often time looked

and was forced to act much older than his years, he was still just a kid, not quite 16 years old. He only hoped that Harry wouldn't try to kill Snape next week when he arrived for his Occlumency lessons, as much as Remus hated Snape (and he had a long, long history with the man), he knew that Harry hated him more.....in point of fact he assumed that Harry probably put Snape on a level with Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucious Malfoy, right below Voldemort.

Thursday, July 19th 1996

Dear Mr. Tyson,

Hello, good day to you. My name is Harry Potter and I have need of your services as a solicitor and would like to schedule an appointment so we can discuss some things. Nora Longbottom recommended you to me and spoke very highly of your work. Travel is a bit dodgy for me at the moment, but I will make my way to Diagon Alley to speak with you whenever you can spare the time. Sooner would be better though, as some of the problems I have are somewhat time sensitive.

I look forward to hearing back from you sir,

Harry Potter

Hedwig had come back late the previous afternoon and Harry reluctantly told her of his new house-elf arrangement. She accepted it without much hooting however, and seemed resigned to the loss of her quiet time. Harry assured her that she would have more letters to deliver than she had lately, so she didn't have to spend so much time at Privet Drive. She went off to Peter Tyson's office, with instructions to wait for his reply

Thus far there had been no sign that the Order knew what he was up to, Harry figured if they hadn't stormed the place by now, they never would. Harry was a bit puzzled at the lack of foresight, perhaps they thought he was no threat to disobey them. He found this rich, he was supposed to kill the most powerful wizard in recent memory (he wasn't too clear on the war over Grindewald), yet the rest of the time he had to be a good little boy and do what he was told. Sometimes

the dichotomy of his life made him laugh. If only Ron and his latent jealousy realized what Harry would do for a normal wizarding life.

Harry had known for over a year now that it would come down to he and Voldemort in some sort of final combat, though not why this would be. Hearing the Prophecy had explained quite a bit to Harry, such as why Voldemort had targeted his parents of all people (to this day Harry didn't even know what his parents did for a living after Hogwarts, when he had asked Hagrid or Sirius they changed the subject). Harry understood that whether or not he believed the Prophecy, and he wasn't sure yet if he did, Voldemort and Dumbledore believed it (even if Voldemort didn't know the whole thing), and this belief drove many of their actions toward him.

By early afternoon Dobby and Winky had come by, with their few belongings and begun to settle in. Harry had warned Dobby that there wasn't much to do yet, but when they came right before lunch Dobby assured Harry that both he and Winky each had a hobby that they used to divert themselves on their days off. Dobby's hobby was making clothes, Winky's was art, a talent she never knew she had while working for the Crouch's. As Harry had expected, Winky had refused to take money, though she did agree after some persuading that Harry could pay her in art supplies. Actually persuading wasn't the word, Harry had to order her to accept the supplies. Winky had opened her mouth to object.....but realized she couldn't object to an order and still be a proper house-elf. Dobby watched this by-play with no small amount of amusement, and joined in to insist that Winky wear some sort of clothes, or at least clean the ones she. She agreed eventually and everyone was happy with how things had turned out. Harry stressed that his relatives were not to know that the elves were there until Harry was ready, Dobby immediately snapped his fingers at the door and said that the Dursleys wouldn't hear any noise short of a banshee cry from this room anymore.

Hedwig returned around 3 pm with a short note from Peter Tyson:

Mr. Potter,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive your communication, and I would be happy to talk with you. Nora Longbottom sent me a missive

yesterday saying that I should expect to hear from you, she had nothing but nice things to say about you, which is quite rare you should know. I am not a member of the Order of the Phoenix, though I know of its existence. I was one year behind Bill Weasley at Hogwarts and succeeded him as Head Boy, we have remained friends over the years and I'm aware of his membership. Attorney-client privilege is the same in the wizarding world as in the muggle world Mr. Potter, so anything you tell me is automatically private.

I know something of your living situation in Surrey (don't be alarmed, most of the wizarding world knows that you live with your muggle relatives during the summer, they simply don't know where), and I realize that Headmaster Dumbledore must have you on a rather short leash, especially with Voldemort back.....yes Mr. Potter, I can write his name without having a heart attack. If you like, I can pop around your house around lunch time, I can bring some sandwiches and we can have our chat. Don't worry, I often wear muggle clothes, so I won't look out of place in your neighborhood and cause any concern. If this is acceptable to you, simply do nothing and we will meet tomorrow, if it isn't, send your owl back to me with an alternative plan.

I look forward to meeting you,

Peter Tyson

Harry couldn't have asked for more than this, and was highly pleased. Things were falling into place for him, he just had to stay lucky a bit longer and he would be free.

In HP canon most adult ages aren't given, so for the sake of my story I'm going to establish the following characters' ages:

Harry and all 6th year students: 16 years old

Luna and all 5th year students: 15 years old

The Marauders, Lily, and Snape: 37 years old

Bill Weasley: 28 years old

Charlie Weasley: 26 years old

Peter Tyson: 27 years old

Molly and Arthur Weasley: 47 years old

Minerva McGonagall: A gentleman never asks

Albus Dumbledore: unknown, likely over 100 years old

Lucious Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange: 40 years old

There might be more involved later.

Friday, July 20 1996

9:00 am

Harry woke up from yet another dream-less sleep, feeling very rested. Harry had been wondering why Voldemort wasn't toying with him lately, he figured that his nemesis would be after him full tilt, taunting about the loss of his godfather. Harry pondered about what turned Tom Riddle into what he had become, he remembered the teenage Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets telling him how closely their lives seemed to parallel. Of all the things Riddle had said to him, that rocked him the most, and gave him the most pause. Harry didn't really think he would turn dark, after all, when Voldemort had offered to help he resurrect his parents during first year he hadn't been tempted.....and if that wouldn't do it, nothing would. Harry felt he

didn't need any of the supposed benefits of being dark; The idea of power didn't do much for him, he had little desire to make people fear him or do his bidding; Money? He had enough of that, judging by what was in his vault.....his vault?!

Uh oh. Harry went over to his desk and whipped out some parchment and wrote a quick letter to Gringotts:

Dear Gringotts manager,

I was wondering if it would be possible to get a balance statement of my account. I may need to make some large type purchases over the next month or so and I would like an idea of how much I have to spend. If possible as well, I would like you to include 1,000 galleons spread over several bank drafts. I'm sorry to put you to any trouble, but I am unable to get to Diagon Alley in the immediate future and must conduct my business this way. I have enclosed my key, as proof that I am who I say I am.

Thank you for your attention,

Harry James Potter

He folded the letter up, the key inside, and taped it shut. Hedwig grabbed it and went on her way, looking happy for the exercise.

Harry literally had no idea what he was worth, money-wise, and decided that if he was going to hire a solicitor that this might be useful information to have at his disposal. Once again Harry was appalled at how little he knew about his own affairs. Harry hadn't even been to his vault in 3 years, since his short time living over The Leaky Cauldron. He had no clue what solicitors cost to hire, but figured the 1,000 galleons would suffice, plus if Gringotts didn't do that sort of thing, there might as well be some benefit to being the "famous Harry Potter" and he assumed that Tyson would think him good for it.

Dobby and Winky came out, and apparated away to get breakfast. Harry had enough galleons on hand to feed the 3 of them for the next few weeks, particularly with 2 house-elves who didn't seem to eat much. Harry had had a firm talk with Winky the previous night before

bed about her butterbeer problem, she promised that she wouldn't drink any as long as Harry said not to. Harry himself liked butterbeer well enough, but he would rather have a Coke than anything.....the things Harry missed most about the muggle world when he was away at the Burrow or Hogwarts were Coke and pizza.

Harry debated on whether to warn Aunt Petunia about his forthcoming visitor, he wasn't sure what to do about that. On the one hand, if he didn't warn her she might slam the door in Mr. Tyson's face and not let him inside.....then again she might do so if he did warn her. Petunia tended to be much quieter and less hostile when Vernon wasn't around, so that was a plus and he could exploit it. Harry knew that a doorbell ringing was coming, because if the Order had any wards on the house they would have anti-apparition ones on it, negating Tyson just popping into his bedroom.....unless of course he was a house-elf like Dobby and Winky, who seemingly could go wherever they wished, wards or not. Harry smiled at this thought, and wondered that a person could do pretty well as a burglar with 2 house-elves as his accomplices.

One more concern was the Order members outside watching the house, what would they do? Harry had noted Tyson's comment about owning muggle clothes and knew that it would not attract too much attention from the outside if Tyson were dressed in a suit, after all muggle salesmen wore suits and called on houses all the time. The worry was if someone recognized him and reported it, after all if Tyson was a former Head Boy at Hogwarts, then everyone there when he was would have known him. Harry thought about all of the Order member he had met, and only Tonks and Bill Weasley fit this criteria, Bill the more so since he and Tyson were friends. Oh well, there was nothing he could do about this, yet another small risk to take.

The one thing that kept Harry going in all of this planning, was knowing that there really was no downside to trying it....after all, could his imprisonment get worse than this? He didn't think it could, thus there was more harm that could be done to him. An added benefit was how he was going about it, Harry knew that if he just went off half-cocked and ran away that he would be caught, and likely kept out of things as long as possible. Harry had decided to keep things

nice and legal-like just in case he was found out, for the sake of his credibility.....credibility that had already been cashed in with Mrs. Longbottom and Peter Tyson. Harry had always been more results oriented than a thinker and planner, but he was becoming more and more enamored of what happened when one combined the two.

The elves came back, and the three of them shared their breakfast of bagels and cream cheese. Harry told them that there would a visitor at around noon, and asked them to conjure up a couple of chairs (there was only one in the room) for them to sit on. He told them that he would like them to stay for the meeting, as it would directly affect them as well as he, and he wanted them to hear about it firsthand. Dobby looked shocked that Harry would include them, but realized that Harry wanted them there as much to be bodyguards as witnesses. He asked Harry if that was the case, surprising Harry with his insight. Harry allowed that it might come to that, he had never met Tyson and didn't know him from Adam, just from a recommendation from a woman he had never met. It didn't hurt to be careful, Harry told them, it was as much for their safety as his.

Meanwhile, at The Burrow:

Ron Weasley poked around the house, doing his chores, more tired than in any summer in recent memory. Fred and George had opened their joke shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, the previous week and had hired Ron and Ginny as part-time help. Ron and Ginny each worked every other day for about 6 hours a pop, and received enough galleons that they weren't going to need to worry about pocket money for the coming school year. The downside was that the twins turned out to be taskmasters at work, making Ron run around like a whirling dervish. There were four of them in the shop at any given time: Fred, George, Lee Jordan, and either Ron or Ginny and they were all kept hopping the first week. This was Ron's first real taste of work that didn't involve de-gnoming, cleaning his room, or Hogwarts' detentions, and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

Like Harry, Ron wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life after Hogwarts. His career counseling session with Professor McGonagall had been much quieter than Harry's, though Ron had enjoyed Harry's recounting of it, he loved the idea of McGonagall screaming at

Umbridge and making her back down. During his session, Ron had broached the idea of becoming an Auror, because it looked like it would be interesting work and a chance to be more involved in the war, which Ron privately believed was going to last a long time. However, while McGonagall had been as diplomatic as possible (for her), she had told Ron that his grades did not bode well for achieving the OWL and NEWT scores necessary to qualify for Auror training. Ron was crushed when he learned this, thinking he would be the only one of his mates not to get into the program. Ron knew that Hermione would get the grades to enter whatever profession she chose, and he figured that his famous friend Harry would be greased into the Auror program if its what he wanted.

Ron was, surprisingly enough for a 16 year old, reasonably self-aware, and knew enough of his own limitations to be worried about his future. He knew that he didn't have Hermione's brains or Harry's raw wizard power. In point of fact, Ron thought that he was a meld of the two, with better than average smarts and more power than Hermione had thus far shown. When Ron did his own playback of the DOM, he felt that he had fought pretty well, though not as well as Harry. What was holding him back was his being a bit lazy, something Hermione was constantly hectoring him about. That hectoring though, was largely tuned out, as Ron had pretty much stopped listening to her when that tone of voice came about.

Ron liked Hermione enough as a person, and thought she was very pretty (more than Harry did)....but he shared Harry's dissatisfaction with her bossy nature, though he had not shared this with Harry. If anything, Ron thought Hermione would make a nice starter girlfriend, someone to have a first relationship, but not a lasting one. He figured the field was pretty clear if he wanted to date Hermione, none of his roommates would go for her (Harry was mistaken when he thought that Ron hadn't picked up on his irritation with Hermione) and Ron was aware that Hermione was not terribly popular with the rest of the House.

Girl problems aside, Ron still didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. Fred and George, while having no problem giving Ron a part-time job, had made it clear that his future wasn't in WWW unless the business expanded greatly. Ron supposed he could always get a job

in his dad's office (the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office), but the idea of spending decades fussing over enchanted teapots and flying carpets left him cold. Quidditch wasn't a consideration, unless got much better over the next 2 years.....which was possible of course. Ron decided to leave this train of thought until after he had looked at his OWL scores and seen what his options might be. Meanwhile, if he was going to get better as a Keeper, he had better go do some flying.

Privet Drive, Noon

A tall man in a dark blue Saville Row suit strode up Privet Drive with briefcase in hand. He checked the numbers on the houses as he went past, looking for a particular one, Number 4. Having found it, he walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

"Hello there, you are Mrs. Dursley I presume?"

"Yes I am, may I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Peter Tyson and I am a solicitor. I am here to see your nephew Harry Potter."

This rocked Petunia, she had assumed him to be normal, but he must be one of 'them' if he wanted to see Harry. She was about to close the door when Harry rushed up to stop her.

"Hello, you must be Mr. Tyson, I'm Harry Potter. Won't you come in?" With a subtle movement of his body he made it so that Tyson had room to enter the house, which he did.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mr. Potter, where would you like to have our discussion?"

"Upstairs in my room sir, right this way."

Petunia looked as if she might object, but Harry and his guest just smiled pleasantly at her and went on their way upstairs, leaving her with a confused expression on her face.

Once in Harry's room, an appallingly small one Tyson noticed, Harry introduced him to Dobby and Winky and they all sat down.

"So what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting Mr. Potter?"

"Please sir, call me Harry."

"As long as you call me Peter, I'm not yet a sir, as the muggle queen doesn't know I exist."

Both of them smiled at the joke, and some of the tension in the room was lifted.

"Peter, before we talk about that I would like to formally hire you as my solicitor, so that all we talk about today will be kept legally private."

Oh this was going to be good, Peter thought. This kid certainly plans ahead doesn't he?

"Harry, I accept the position as your solicitor, therefore this entire conversation is between the 2 of us.....sorry, the 4 of us (Dobby and Winky smiled shyly at this). We can discuss my fee after we decide what I'm going to be doing for you."

"Terrific. The first thing I would like you to do is do a scan on this house, and find out what wards and spells are in place. I know there must be at least a couple, and I would be interested to know what they are."

"A suspicious one aren't you? Not that I blame you of course. Let's give it a go."

Peter took out his wand and mumbled some incantations that Harry couldn't make out clearly and did some wands motions that looked like a muggle radar screen.

"Interesting, very interesting. There is an anti-apparition ward on the house, which I fully expected to be here, hence my ringing the doorbell. By the way, in case you were wondering, I would not have

forced my way inside had she slammed the door in my face.....yes Harry, I could tell that's what she was about to do. I have no interest in letting your minders outside, there are 2 of them by the way, know that you have a wizard visiting you, as they would not likely let that visit go uninterrupted. There is also a silencing charm on your door here, and an enlarging charm on the closet, which I assume you know about."

Harry nodded, "Yes, Dobby is the one who did those spells, so that my Aunt and Uncle wouldn't know that the elves are here."

"Wise move, spell work is why you have them here I imagine, not wanting a repeat of last summer?"

"Right, I would prefer to say on the right side of the law, whatever I might think of it."

" Well Harry there are no other spells currently on the house....I'm guessing you were worried about listening charms?"

"Yes Peter, I don't want Dumbledore's people to know what I'm planning, they would be in here in a minute to try and stop me."

" Stop you from doing what Harry, what is it you have in mind to do? I have a good idea, but I'd like to hear it from you."

"Put simply Peter, I want to gain legal emancipation in both the wizarding world and the muggle world, so that I can begin to make my own decisions, without any interference."

"Well Harry, that's what I thought you would say, based on your letter yesterday. I did a bit of research into you and learned more than a little of what we would need to get that freedom. Am I right in assuming that you have not discussed this with your relatives?"

"Yes, the only ones I have mentioned it to are in this room."

"Ok, easy things first. Emancipating you in the muggle world will be pretty simple, as long as your Aunt and Uncle sign off on it. The wizarding world will be a bit harder, but its still workable, since there

is only one more year til you are an adult anyway. Yesterday afternoon after I received your owl, I sent a message to my wife, who happens to work in the Records Department at the Ministry of Magic, requesting that she make a copy of your file on the sly. Would you like to see it?"

Harry looked shocked, "I have a file? For what?"

"Oh we all have files Harry, there aren't that many wizards in Great Britain and the Ministry likes to keep tabs on us."

"Sure, I'd be very interested in seeing it."

Peter opened his briefcase, and after tossing sandwiches to Harry and his elves, took out a folder and handed it to Harry

Harry James Potter

Date of birth: July 31, 1980

Place of birth: Godric's Hollow, Wales

Current Place of Residence: Little Whinging, Surrey

Blood: Mixed

Criminal Record: One count of Underage Magic, 1992

Hogwarts House: Gryffindor

Class Rank: 7th out of 39

OWL results: TBA

NEWT results: TBA

Parents:

James William Potter

DOB: April 12, 1959

DOD: October 31, 1981

Occupation: Chaser, Puddlemere United

Lily Marie Evans Potter

DOB: May 13, 1959

DOD: October 31, 1981

Occupation: Ancient Runes Professor, Hogwarts

Guardians: Petunia Evans Dursley and Vernon Dursley, muggles

Relationship: maternal Aunt and husband

The rest of the file had newspaper clippings of his various exploits.

Harry sat there quietly for a minute, "You know before this I never even knew what my parents did for a living."

"You must be kidding."

Harry shook his head, "No one would tell me Peter, they always changed the subject."

Peter didn't know what to say to this, this kid's entire family history had been denied him. Peter Tyson was no lover of Dumbledore, but he had until this time at least respected him, but this was beyond the pale. Peter knew that only Dumbledore could have imposed that level of silence on his staff and associates.

"Well Harry, if I was unsure before, I'm not now. I'll do what I can to help you get your freedom. I would, however, like to know what you hope to accomplish with it. You do, for all intents and purposes, have only 3 more months left outside of Hogwarts and the underage magic rules before your 17th birthday. Are you intending to leave Hogwarts

early? I know Fred and George Weasley made a big splash by doing it, but they had a clearly defined plan of what to do once they did."

"Peter, if I am able to gain my freedom I would like to explore continuing my education outside of Great Britain and Hogwarts, possibly in America."

Author's Note: This seems like a good place to leave off. I am going to try, initially anyway, to update 4 times per week. I work Monday through Friday nights, so figure on 2 updates during the work week, with 2 more on the weekend. I anticipate this being one of those omnibus 6th and 7th year fics, with the 6th year being done sometime in March. Who knows though, I'll see where the story takes me. This has been a lot of fun so far, I'm looking forward to this journey.

"Peter, if I am able to gain my freedom I would like to explore continuing my education outside of Great Britain and Hogwarts, possibly in America or Canada."

Silence dominated the room as Harry's words sunk in to his audience. Dobby and Winky knew the plan of course, but it still hadn't seemed real until Harry had spoken it to someone else.

"Well Harry.....I must say that I pride myself on rarely being surprised, but I have to admit that you just qualified for the 'rarely'. I had assumed that you simply wanted to do some spell practice.....or to get out of living with your relatives."

"Why did you think I wanted to get out of living here? I thought this place and my life here was supposed to be secret."

"Harry, most of the wizarding world knows that you live with muggles who don't like magic. There have been a few articles in the Daily Prophet, and your schoolmates haven't been terribly close-mouthed about your home life as they know it. Now how many know you live here in Little Whinging? Probably not many, other than Dumbledore and his people. I found out, as I mentioned, through my wife and her records access. What I don't know is why you haven't been attacked here, Voldemort's people aren't the brightest lot in the country, but at least one of them must know how to do some muggle information research to find you mother's relations and where they might be."

"The Ministry knows Peter, Umbridge sent those Dementors after me last summer, and she knew right where to direct them."

"So that's how the Dementors got here, I'd always wondered about that. She admitted this to you?"

"Yes she did, in front of about a dozen witnesses.....though half of them want me dead, so I doubt they would vouch for me. Speaking of which, she hasn't been arrested or anything? I would hope that Remus or Dumbledore would have mentioned it to me."

"Remus, as in Remus Lupin?"

"Right, do you know him?"

"I know of him.....famous Marauder, werewolf, former instructor of yours if I recall correctly." Sees Harry's reaction to the Marauder comment, "Oh yes Harry, the Marauders were famous, even though I didn't get a chance to go to school with any of them I hear many a story about their pranks.....particularly when Snape showed up my 4th year to teach Potions, when that happened a lot of stories were recycled."

In spite of the seriousness of the situation Harry couldn't help but smile. Anytime Snape was held up to ridicule was fine with him.

"As to why the Death Eater's haven't attacked me? I guess it must be because of the blood protection that my aunt gives me, no one is supposed to be able to harm me in the house, magically anyway."

"Hmmmm.....interesting, that tells me something.....so let me ask you this Harry, how much news have you gotten since you came back here for break?"

"Nothing, I don't get the Daily Prophet anymore since all they do is print lies and half truths about me, and The Quibbler isn't what one could call a News-type paper."

Peter laughed at that one, he remember that there was a Lovegood daughter at Hogwarts now and Harry must know her to have given The Quibbler that kind of access, access he had never in fact granted to a newspaper before.

"Well Harry, your close personal friend Umbridge has not been seen, rumor has it she's either in seclusion somewhere, or in St. Mungo's under a false name. Whatever you kids did to her at the end of the year must have been something. Bill told me about the swamp that the twins used in the hallway, I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time.....and I understand you had something to do with their joke shop?"

"Yes I did, though that's not common knowledge. I gave them my Tri-Wizard winnings."

"That's what I thought....not about the Tri-Wizard winnings, but most people who know Fred and George are assuming that you are their backer, given that the Weasley family is not a rich one....how could it be, with 7 kids....and you are their one rich friend. I don't think Molly has deduced it yet, or maybe she has and just doesn't want to admit it. When you come to Diagon Alley next we'll make a point to stop there. Anyway, back to what I was saying, about news.....Fudge is hanging on so far, he came clean in the press about his inactions and the public seems to be buying it as simply an overworked man's errors in judgment."

Harry started laughing when he heard that, then stopped when he thought about it, did he want Fudge still in office? He voiced this concern to Peter.

"I think for the moves you have in mind Harry, that you do want Fudge still as Minister. I'm going to assume (there's that word again) that you don't know much about the wizarding political system, given that you're not a Ravenclaw, and thus don't pay any attention in History of Magic." He smiled when he said this, so Harry didn't take what was in fact a true statement as an insult.

"Harry, the Minister of Magic is elected by a public vote every 5 years, the next scheduled election being in April, 1998. This is Fudge's 3rd term in office, and he has given no indication that he wants to retire. A Minister, or any department head for that matter, can be removed by a  $\frac{3}{4}$  vote of the Wizengamot, a body with which you are now familiar after last August I imagine. The Wizengamot is made up of 40 witches and wizards, who serve 10 year terms. Members generally are re-appointed for life unless they are hit by a major scandal and choose to resign, or of course if they die. So 30 members of the Wizengamot must agree to remove Fudge, and you should know that after the Lestranges were broken out of Azkaban that Fudge did survive a no-confidence vote, only 17 members voted to kick him out. Most of the rest said that it either wasn't Fudge's fault or just wasn't enough to impeach the head of our government.

"Another factor Harry is that there isn't really a bona-fide person to replace Fudge, since everyone knows that Dumbledore won't take on

the job. The usual names mentioned are Amelia Bones, Amos Diggory, and Manuel Zabini, I believe you know, or knew their children?”

“Yes I do, though Susan Bones is Amelia’s niece, not daughter. Blaise Zabini is a 6th year Slytherin, and Cedric...” Harry went quiet at that point, and Peter gave him a minute to collect himself.

“So anyway, none of those 3 has the widespread support to galvanize an impeachment movement, though I would expect at least 2 of them to run against Fudge in the next election. The muggles have a saying ‘you have to knock the champ out, its not enough to beat him on points’, that’s the attitude here.”

“What about you, are you interested in someday becoming Minister?”

Peter smiled, he got this question a lot from muggleborns who always saw people in his profession go for Parliament.

“No Harry, I have no interest in what really is a thankless job. I do, however, intend to stand for the Wizengamot when I reach proper age, you must be 35 to be a member, so I have 8 years to go. That’s the extent of my desire to participate in government, and even that is because I believe it will help solidify my legal practice.

Harry digested all of this, he found this fascinating and a bit odd, finally an adult wizard was talking to him person-to-person and not evading his questions. Another occurred to him to ask:

“How many wizards are there in Britain Peter?”

“Roughly 20,000 or so Harry, with somewhere around 1 million around the world. That gives the muggles a 6,000 to 1 population advantage on us Harry, you must remember that whenever the Pureblood brigade mocks and insults Muggles, its that ratio that’s in the back of their mind, if not the front. They know that if the muggles ever found out about us and came after us in force, we wouldn’t stand a chance.....our shields don’t stop bullets Harry.”

Harry ruminated on that for a minute, it certainly explained a lot about muggle/wizard relations, and why there had to be the kind of secrecy that there was.

"How much does the muggle government know about us?"

"Not much ,the Prime Minister.....Tony Blair right now, is briefed when he takes office, though a charm is placed on him so that he can't talk about us to just anyone. The Royal family knows, some of them over the years have been our kind, though none have ever been King or Queen."

Harry had heard about the very interesting Windsor family, they were always being talked about in the muggle newspapers, he was amused at the idea of one or more of them being wizards.

"Back to what we were talking about.....though I what you're telling me is very interesting.....why would it be better for me for Fudge to be in power? He's not my biggest fan you know, he's never believed anything I've said, about Voldemort being back, or Sirius being innocent."

"Hang on a minute, you're telling me that Quibbler stuff was true about Sirius Black? That wasn't one of Lovegood's 'inventions'?"

"It was true, Sirius Black was innocent of my parents' murder, it was their other friend, Peter Pettigrew....yes, another Marauder....that set them up and betrayed them to Voldemort."

Harry paused for a minute, understanding how incomplete his stories must be to Peter. "Peter, would you like me to tell you what my Hogwarts life has been like? I know you must have heard some of it, but if you have the time perhaps you'd like to hear all of it, the truth this time, rather than rumor. I mean, I don't want to keep you from other appointments....."

Dang this was a polite kid, how on earth did wind up like this with that woman raising him?

"This is my last appointment for the day Harry, I was going to spend the rest of my afternoon doing paperwork, but its nothing that can't wait. Fire away."

Author's Note: Don't panic folks, I'm not going to spend 10 pages going over the events of the 5 books

Harry spent the next 2 hours telling his story, telling Peter how he found out about being a wizard, to meeting Ron on the train, the search for the Philosopher's Stone, which Peter had actually heard of, he had met Nicholas Flamel before. Harry took Peter, figuratively anyway, down into the Chamber of Secrets with him and told about how most of the school had believed he was the Heir of Slytherin.....something Peter found hilarious in its absurdity, he assured Harry that the Sorting Hat didn't have quite so large a sense of humor to put the Heir of Slytherin into Gryffindor House. People will believe anything, Peter told him. Harry described his Dementor experiences, and how Remus had taught him his Patronus, a spell that Peter admitted that he had never tried to cast...and hoped never to need to. Sirius Black was talked about, and the revelations in the Shrieking Shack about who actually had betrayed his parents. The Tri-Wizard Tournament was more public knowledge, but Barty Crouch Jr. was not, Peter had had no idea that Crouch had been teaching students at Hogwarts for an entire school year right under Dumbledore's nose. Peter knew all about Umbridge and her insanities, though not about the blood quill and the threat of Cruciatus. He described in detail what happened at the Department of Mysteries, and how he had not only watched Sirius fall through the Veil, and that he had used an Unforgivable on Bellatrix Lestrange, his godfather's murderer. Harry reflected on his friends, his enemies (particularly Draco Malfoy and Snape), and how truly lonely was, in spite of being the most famous 16 year old wizard in the world.

Finally, Harry shared the full text of the Prophecy with Peter, something he had not done with Ron or Hermione. He felt that Peter should know the whole truth, if only for his own safety (Peter's safety).

After he was done, Harry looked exhausted, and Peter could tell that this was a story that Harry had never told in its entirety. Dobby and Winky ran over to him when it was over and hugged him tightly, as

Harry struggled to keep control of his emotions. Peter too was visibly moved, he wasn't quite sure what to say to Harry at this moment. Here was the oldest 15 year old kid that he had ever met. Peter had known that Harry had been through some hard times over the last few years, but nothing like what he had just heard. Just looking at Harry's face when it was done told him that every word was true.

"Harry, why don't you go to the loo and splash some water on your face, I need a few minutes to think."

Harry blanched, as he thought that Peter might be leaving, but Peter anticipated this:

"No Harry, I'm not going back on our deal, you've just hit me with quite the recollection and I need to let it sink in. Dobby and Winky can stay and make sure I don't do anything rash," he smiled weakly.

Harry left the room and the room descended back into silence. Hedwig tapped at the window, which Harry had closed earlier, Peter looked at Dobby who nodded, and opened the window. Hedwig flew in with a thick envelope and went to her water bowl.

Harry came back in the room, looking better than he had when he left. He and Peter watched each other for a minute, and Peter pointed out to him that his owl had returned. Harry went over and stroked Hedwig for a minute, thanking her for all the great work she had done for him. Hedwig did the owl version of a cat's purr, and this seemed to give Harry some strength back, as he opened the envelope, it was from Gringott's.

Dear Mr. Potter

We received your note this morning and are happy to comply with your requests, as they are perfectly normal for someone with your background. We have enclosed a total of 5 bank drafts that spread evenly the 1,000 galleons you requested, if you require anymore don't hesitate to send your owl to come get them.

Here is a list of your total assets:

665,308 galleons currently are in your vault at the Diagon Alley branch of Gringotts

30,239 galleons are currently in your vault at the Orion Alley branch of Gringotts in Toronto, Canada

You have no spending limits Mr. Potter, the 1,200 galleons that you have removed over the previous 5 years have not made a dent, nor is the 4,000 galleons a year that Hogwarts removes a burden on you. We remind you that the will of Sirius Black still needs to be read, you are a beneficiary along with Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin, your assets will no doubt increase significantly, as the Black estate is a large one.

If you have any further inquiries or transactions, don't hesitate to send us an owl.

Fortrap

Senior Account Manager

Gringotts Bank

Diagon Alley, London

Harry handed over the letter to Peter without a word, Peter read it also without comment, though he was internally relieved that this wouldn't be a pro-bono client. He knew that if this matter went as far as he thought it possible, his career would either make a giant leap or a large drop.....taking on Albus Dumbledore was not to be done lightly.

"Ok Harry.....where do I start.....I'm glad you shared that with me Harry, both your story and your financial statement. The story explains quite a bit, and the money means that you have the resources to walk away, or at the very least to convincingly threaten it. You appear to be bothered most about your lack of say in your life, coupled with the fact that each year you've been at Hogwarts someone has either tried to kill you or suck your soul out." Harry nodded his agreement with both statements

"Harry, who else knows about the Prophecy?"

"Dumbledore, and the 4 of us. Voldemort knows the first part of it, but not the last. That's what he was trying to con me into giving him at the Department of Mysteries. His lackeys likely know that there IS a prophecy, but little or nothing about what it contains."

"You haven't told any of your friends? Not that I would want to either, but they did wind up risking their lives to protect its secret."

"I haven't told them.....well to protect them I guess. Dumbledore said that no one should know, so that Voldemort couldn't torture the information out of them."

"Are you sure that Dumbledore hasn't told anyone else? Such as Snape, or your friend Lupin?"

"He claims that he hasn't, although I won't speak for what he might have said since the holidays started."

"Harry, speak plainly to me now, your gut feeling.....do you believe this Prophecy?"

"I don't know Peter, I just don't know. I mean it certainly explains why Voldemort came after me when I was just a baby. I had thought that he just hated my parents, since they were members of the Order (he had described the Order of the Phoenix to Peter during the story, but not most of its members or its location) and were on the light side.....but I just can't get past the fact that it was Trelawney who was the one who gave it, I just have a hard time believing that anything she says is the gospel."

"Well I don't blame you there, Ravenclaws don't usually take Divination Harry, so I never had the pleasure of her classes (both of them smirked when he said that), or of even meeting her, she never came down from her blessed tower.....though now I'm wondering if Dumbledore keeps her hidden up there, to prevent anyone from using Occlumency to break into that fragile head of hers."

“Dumbledore believes every word of it Peter, that’s why he keeps me locked up here just like Trelawney.”

“True, very true....which makes his Hogwarts’ decisions that much more puzzling. How on earth could he not have suspected something from Quirrel or Crouch/Moody? A known Death Eater not only teaching an important course, but being a head of House? Snape didn’t take over Slytherin until I had left, but I couldn’t believe it when I heard of it. Now Harry, do you honestly believe that your friend Hermione is informing on you?”

“I don’t want to believe it, and I know that if she is doing it she’s thinks she’s protecting me.....but the facts seem to bear it out. Hermione worships authority, I think if Dumbledore or McGonagall said it was for my own good, she’d tell them what I was doing, or what I’m planning.”

“Its safe to say then, that you have no intention of sharing this with her, your ‘relocation plans’?”

“Absolutely not, I’ll write her a nice long letter when I’m on the plane, if that’s in fact what I wind up doing.”

“But why leave Harry? Why walk away from Great Britain? I’m not saying I blame you, but what’s your reasoning.”

“Peter, I’m tired. I don’t just mean right this minute, but I mean overall. I’m tired. I’m sick of fighting a war where I’m not entirely sure who I’m fighting, I just know I’m not winning. I’m tired of the chore of being the ‘Boy Who Lived’ , either worshipped or hated no matter what I do. People point at my scar like I’m some museum piece, they talk about me in loud tones as if I can’t hear them, or they don’t care if I do. Most of all I’m tired of people being horrible to me for something that I have no control over, I can’t take it anymore, its like pieces of glass in my head, all the time. I’ve had no life Peter, not here at the Dursleys’, not at Hogwarts, not anywhere. I might live to graduate from Hogwarts, I might not.....but why should I bother when my life isn’t mine?”

Harry finally broke down, and his cries of anguish filled the room

Author's Note: That last speech is my nod to The Green Mile (book by Stephen King, screenplay by Frank Darabont), the scene when Michael Clarke Duncan and Tom Hanks are talking is one of my favorite ever movie moments, and this is my homage to it (the pieces of glass line of course, I ripped right from it).

Peter and the elves sat in the room quietly, almost afraid to move. After about a minute Harry seemed to stiffen, and looked up, no longer crying.

Peter quietly asked, "Did that help Harry? Letting all of that out?"

"Yes it did, I feel a lot better thank you.....and thank you for listening Peter. Everyone else I talk to about things like that always go 'oh it will be alright Harry' or 'you have to get past it'; or my favorite one 'calm down'.....does anyone ever calm down after being told to like that?"

"I wouldn't think so," Peter laughed and some of the emotion in the room dissipated. Peter leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, lost in thought.

"Ok Harry, here's the thing.....I'm going to ask a few questions, both for my own information and to get you thinking about what to do next. What we have here is a broad plan, which we need to narrow down. After that I'm going to leave for the night, and come back tomorrow. I want to give you the night to think about some things Harry: whether or not you really want to do this, perhaps this talk was the catharsis you've needed to carry on; how far you're willing to go to defy Dumbledore.....now don't even say it, I know he isn't your boss, but he acts like it and his people are going to enforce it whether you and I like it or not; where you want to go if you get your freedom right now; if you don't get your freedom in the next month, are you willing to live as a muggle for a year and wait these people out, I'm positive I can get you emancipated in the muggle world as long as your Aunt and Uncle agree to it. Speaking of which, that's why I'm coming back tomorrow, we need to talk with them and apprise them of what's going on. I'll speak to your Aunt on my way out and assure her that they will like this discussion, since it involves you leaving and never coming back.....I am right in thinking that you never want to come back here?"

Harry nodded, the idea of willing coming back here made his skin crawl. "Ok, what do you want to ask me?"

"First, how good is your Occlumency.....be brutally honest here Harry, this is important, and not for the reason you're thinking."

"My Occlumency needs work Peter, there's no way I can keep Voldemort out if he really wants in."

"That's not who I'm worried about Harry, its Snape and Dumbledore. If they get a hold of you they can break through your mind like a pinata and easily discover all that we've been talking about here. Now you said that Snape is due here a week from today?"

"Yes, Dumbledore only wants him to teach me, he says there's no one else that can do it, and he won't do it himself."

"Well that's one of the few decisions I agree with, given what you've told me about the Order.....no, not the Snape part, I mean about Dumbledore not doing it himself. He wasn't telling you the whole truth when he said that no one else can do it, only a sheltered teenager would believe that there are just three Occlumency experts in the wizarding world (Snape, Dumbledore, and Voldemort), and our Headmaster has done everything in his considerable power to keep you sheltered. There just don't happen to be any other Occlumency experts in the Order or at Hogwarts....which I still have trouble believing, but that's a debate for another time."

"Tomorrow before I come here I'm going to go to Flourish and Blotts and buy some books for you, both on Occlumency and Defense. Don't worry about the cost, I'll just add it to your bill at the end, I make a nice living and can front the cost of a few books. Then starting next week I'm going to spend an hour a night teaching you Occlumency myself, all wizarding solicitors must demonstrate competence in it before we can get our licenses. This isn't designed to protect you from Voldemort Harry, its designed to protect your plans from invasive and nosy Headmasters. I have an idea to get Snape out of here, but I'll have to run it by your Aunt and Uncle, since it technically is their house. That, however, will only delay the inevitable, but it will give us an extra day or 2.

"Ok, back to Fudge and how this whole thing got started. Harry, the reason we want Fudge still around for a few weeks is that one can work with Fudge, contrary to what you may think, he can be reasoned with, and I'm not just talking about with money. I'm aware that Fudge isn't the chairman of your fan club, but you are offering him two things that he greatly would benefit from: a breach between you and Dumbledore, and you leaving the country for at least 2 years. The first one alone is likely enough to get him on our side, since he will have to approve our petition to have you emancipated.....though that's a grey area really, I've no doubt that all Ministry workers are instructed that anything dealing with your situation is to be sent to his office. Fudge doesn't hate you Harry, he just sees you as a threat, even though I can't see him still wanting to be Minister of Magic in 20 years when you're eligible for it. He fears you and Dumbledore together, and he's seen how Dumbledore has made you so loyal to him over the years.

"Now, I saw in your file about an underage magic violation from 4 years ago, what's that about?"

Harry and Dobby looked at each other and smiled, this was the first night that they had met after all. Harry told the story of how he and Dobby had first gotten together and the dropping of the pie. Dobby freely admitted that he did the deed, looking a bit sheepish that he had gotten Harry in trouble.

"Well that's easily fixable, we'll do that first thing when we go to the Ministry. Dobby, you'll come along with us and tell Madam Bones your story, though that might not do it. Harry, you might have to be willing to take some veritaserum to confirm this, but I'll make sure she doesn't ask anything too risky or irrelevant."

Harry and Dobby both nodded, that didn't seem to bad.

"I'd better be going now Harry, I've been here over 3 hours it seem and your friends outside might scan us any minute and notice that there're 3 more magical beings in here than there are supposed to. Do you have any questions for me?"

"One thing that you brought up earlier I'm curious about Peter, you said that our shields can't stop bullets, can you explain that?"

"Sure Harry.....you see, our spells aren't solid in their natural form, they are more or less concentrations of air with a lot of energy. That's why Protego works against most spells, because its made of the same material. Bullets are solid Harry, and they move at a speed our shields don't recognize or can adapt to. There are advanced shields of course that can deflect solid objects and more powerful spells.....before you ask, no shield invented thus far can deflect Avada Kedavra or Cruciatus, and believe me, they've tried to come up with some.....anyway, those solid shields work more in the matter of muggle shields from the Middle Ages, like from the muggle movie Braveheart. None of those would stand up to bullets either."

"Harry, for 3,000 years wizards had the edge over muggles when it came to fighting, even as their population grew and ours barely did. You know that in 1900 there were only 2 billion muggles world-wide? There were 900,000 wizards at that time, but we've increased only 10 and they've tripled. Then 450 years ago, the gun was invented, and our advantage has been slipping away ever since."

"Why can't we use guns against Voldemort? Won't that kill him?"

"No Harry, guns won't work for one simple reason.....wizards have always held guns to be unacceptable for any reason whatsoever. Look at how muggles have butchered each other since the gun was invented. In World War 2 over 40 million people died Harry. The industrial revolution has in some ways been the best thing ever to happen to muggles, but one day they're going to wipe themselves out."

Peter paused for a minute and tried think how he would frame this;

"We wizards seem very quaint at times, we don't use electricity mostly, we don't use automobiles or guns or anything that most muggles consider 'modern' Muggle born and raised wizards and witches often have a hard time adjusting to wizard life because they don't have all their conveniences. With a few notable exceptions, we have changed very little in the 1000 years since Hogwarts was

founded and wizard life in Britain truly came together. One might think that wrong, since we're not evolving to meet the changing of the times, but we look at it as why should we mess around with what works?"

"Now you were asking why someone can't just take a .45, walk up behind our buddy Voldemort and pull the trigger.....because it crosses a line that wizards for the last 450 years have agreed not to cross. Even Voldemort himself has never used one, to my knowledge. The only wizard in recorded history to have crossed that line was Grindewald, and he rarely used one himself, and never on wizards. You see, Grindewald loved killing, and when he came to the height of his powers 70 years or so ago, there was relative peace in the wizarding world, so Grindewald insinuated himself in the muggle world. He saw that there was to be another large war coming , and he attached himself to a man that was very powerful and liked killing as much as he did. The muggle's name was Adolph Hitler, and Grindewald was known in the muggle world as Heinrich Himmler. Together they were responsible for the deaths of over 25 million Jews and Russians Harry. Oh Dumbledore stopped him eventually, I love how they called Himmler's death a 'suicide', only because muggles can't explain an Avada Kedavra death.

"What I'm trying to get across Harry, is that even for dark wizards there are rules, and Voldemort may not follow any rule but that one, but he does follow it. Now you or I, or anyone else could kill him with a gun, but we would automatically become pariahs in our world, the most wanted and hated person in the history of wizard culture. You'd be better off using the next bullet on yourself if you were to do that."

"Harry, this is a war between Voldemort and Dumbledore, its not much more than a muggle gang war. Dumbledore and his Order of the Phoenix on one side, Voldemort and his Death Eaters on the other. Of the 20,000 wizards and witches in Britain, maybe 500 are directly involved one way or the other. 500 Harry, less than 3 of our population. Now most of the rest want Dumbledore to win mind you, I know I do, after all he was either our Transfiguration teacher or our Headmaster, he's touched all of our lives with his twinkling eyes and love of muggle candy. But ask yourself this Harry, why aren't more people getting involved? Because the pure-bloods only see this as a

battle for the future of muggle borns in our world, that's Voldemort's whole platform.....and regrettably, most wizards don't see that as worth dying over.

Wow, this was unlike any history lesson Harry had ever sat through.  
“When you get those books tomorrow will you throw a couple of history books in with them? I want to learn more about this.”

“Sure thing Harry, heaven knows Binns wouldn’t have gotten that across very well. I honestly don’t know how Dumbledore can preside over a staff meeting with a straight face: Lousy teachers in Potions, Defense, Divination, and History, it’s a wonder that Britain’s test scores aren’t the worst in wizarding Europe.”

“One thing I would like you to consider tonight Harry, I think you should let one of your friends in on what you’re planning. Preferably they’d be in the Order or close to it, so that you could get a pulse of what you’re up against.....sorry, what WE are up against. I realize you don’t know Bill that well, but I think he could help you a lot, as could Fred and George. Those guys know Dumbledore better than I do, and perhaps better than you do. You may think you would be getting them in trouble with Molly if she finds out, but those 3 more than the others are willing to stand up to her.”

Harry smiled at that, too true he thought. He racked his brain to think of any other questions, but couldn’t come up with any that couldn’t wait a night to ask.

“Thanks Peter, I’ll think about that, it might be a wise move. What time should I expect you tomorrow?”

“I’ll make it at 2 pm if I can, when I leave I’ll make sure with your aunt that they will both be here.”

“Oh yeah, how did you know that I had two ‘minders’, as you called them, out there?”

“I picked up on their magical signature with my scan. They could do the same here if they scanned your house. You said that Dobby and Winky have been here since yesterday and nothing has happened. I

think they would notice 2 house-elves. They really are counting on that blood protection aren't they? The guards outside must be to keep you inside, not keep others out, since they've done a darn poor job in prevention. Have you left the house since you've been back?"

"No I haven't, I just figured that they wouldn't let me."

"Well no point in testing them out now. There is going to be a confrontation soon Harry, between you and Dumbledore, we need to have everything in place that we can before that happens. Figuratively we need to be able to pick the weapons and we sure as anything need to control the battlefield. I'm not exaggerating Harry, you know better than anyone about Dumbledore's obsession with keeping you safe, he's not going to take any of this lying down."

"I understand Peter, I'm ready to do what is necessary, short of killing Dumbledore of course."

"Well it won't come to that Harry, if he really believes you're this superweapon, he won't risk alienating you too much. The hardest part will be convincing him that you're serious and not just indulging in some childish whim, I need some time to think about that, how we're going to handle that."

"Meanwhile Harry, think about the things I asked you to, I'll see you tomorrow at 2 pm."

He reached out his hand and Harry shook it, he then surprised Harry by doing the same with Dobby and Winky. Peter walked downstairs and saw Petunia sitting in the living room.

"Mrs. Dursley, Harry and I have had a talk and I'm going to be representing him in some legal matters. I would like to talk with you and your husband tomorrow afternoon around 2:30 pm, will you both be home?"

"I believe we will, yes. What is this all about? Is the boy in any kind of trouble?"

"No ma'am he isn't, Harry is just interested in taking a bit more control over his affairs in our world. Believe me when I tell you Mrs. Dursley, you and your husband will like this conversation. Harry has told me of your hostility to our kind, and given your treatment by some of our people I don't especially blame you. This is designed to fix that Mrs. Dursley, we just need 30 minutes of your time tomorrow."

"I suppose that will be fine, I'll tell my husband when he gets home. Does Dudley need to be there as well?"

"Not necessarily Mrs. Dursley, but if he is here and you would like him to attend, Harry and I certainly have no objections. I must stress that what happens stays between the 5 of us, no matter what any white bearded wizard may tell you otherwise."

Petunia smiled faintly at this, finally a freak who had manners.....though in her heart of hearts she acknowledged that Harry was very polite as well, even if she never would admit it to Vernon.

"Ok Mr. Tyson, I can speak for my husband and I on that count."

"Thank you Mrs. Dursley, I'll see you tomorrow, have a nice evening."

Without another word or gesture, Peter left the house and walked down Privet Drive, presumably to a secluded spot where he could apparate back to his office.

Harry returned to his room without looking at his aunt and shut the door. He took some time to digest what had happened that day, and all he had learned about himself. Harry mentally patted himself on the back for asking Mrs. Longbottom for her advice, his meeting with Peter Tyson could not have gotten better. Harry was aware that he had struck a cord with Tyson, but he still knew Tyson was doing what he thought practical. He also sensed some resentment of Dumbledore, perhaps some incident in the past. Maybe they had knocked heads at Hogwarts or something, he didn't know.....and wasn't sure if he wanted to ask. All he knew is that he had hired a professional advocate, someone who did this kind of thing for a living and would give him solid advice. This had been a good day.

Grimmaud Place, 6:30 pm

Remus sat at the dining room tables, lost in his own little world as Order of the Phoenix members filed in and sat down for their weekly meeting. Snape was still in Canada, but the rest of the core members were here: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Molly and Arthur, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, Hestia Jones, and many others, including Bill, Fred, and George Weasley. Molly hadn't been happy with the twins joining the Order, but after they had not-so-subtly threatened to go Percy on her, she had relented. Remus couldn't understand her frustration with the twins, surely grades didn't matter to her that much? Gred and Forge, as they referred to themselves, were adamant that they wouldn't return to Hogwarts for the last 2 months of their 7th year, they said they had no interest in NEWT scores or dealing with any more rules than they had to. Their business was up and running quite well, Remus reminded himself to get a care package of WWW items to send to Harry for his birthday....or perhaps Harry would allow him to visit by then. His estrangement from Harry was puzzling to Remus, he knew about the 'don't write me for awhile' letter Harry had sent out, and was worried about Harry being stuck there all alone with no one to talk with.

Dumbledore stood up, "Well my friends, lets get this meeting underway. Hestia, I believe you and Kingsley had guard duty today?"

"Yes we did, as usual not much happened. To our knowledge Harry has not left the house since he arrived from Kings Cross 2 weeks ago. Harry has sent his owl on an average of a delivery every other day. Lately the only owl other than Hedwig to appear there has been one that we now know to be Luna Lovegood's."

This raised some eyebrows among the Weasleys, who had been forced to listen to Ron go spare when Harry had asked to be left alone for a time, Harry had not written to anyone else since.

Shacklebolt continued the narrative, "There was one visitor today, we didn't recognize him and he was dressed in a very nice muggle suit. Petunia Dursley let him in the house right away and he stayed for about 3 hours, no screams or shouting going on, so he couldn't have

been one of us. He's the only visitor that we've noticed in the last 2 weeks, other than several of Dudley Dursley's friends. Nothing unusual has gone on."

"Well good, young Mr. Potter appears to be developing a cautious streak. Who is on duty right now Tonks?"

"Moody and Dung, Moody won't let Dung do guard duty without him there to supervise him, he doesn't trust him after last summer."

Everyone in the room chuckled, Moody had been enraged at Fletcher's screwup last August and had to be talked out of killing the smuggler. Molly Weasley spoke up:

"When are you going to let him out of that awful place Albus? You know its not good for him to be there with those nasty people."

"Sometime in mid-August Molly. We will remove him from Privet Drive and bring him here. He needs to be there at least a month this time, then we can take him out. Harry is safe where he is now, and he hasn't written anything to me complaining. Severus is going to be going there next week to begin his Occlumency lessons again, he will observe things and find out if its necessary to remove him sooner."

This caused consternation among the Weasleys, all of whom knew how much those 2 hated each other. Fred Weasley couldn't restrain himself and burst out:

"Really Professor, does it have to be Snape? We all know how successful that was the last time you tried it."

Molly initially looked as if she wanted to smack Fred for his tone of voice, then realized that she agreed with what he was saying. In fact the entire room agreed with Fred, Snape was easily the most unpopular person in the Order, and was only tolerated because Dumbledore insisted on it. They knew that Snape was spying on the Death Eaters, but he had been finding out little, as Voldemort was slow to trust Snape again.

"Professor Snape, Fred, is the best Occlumens we have available to teach Harry. He has assured me that he will strive harder to get his message across, and I believe him."

Remus couldn't take this any longer, and spoke up for the first time at an Order meeting since the death of Sirius Black:

"I want the record here to reflect my view that putting the two of them in the same room, with no supervision, is a recipe for disaster. One of 2 things will happen: either Harry, Snape, or both will be taking a fast trip to St. Mungo's.....or Harry will be hauled in yet again before the Wizengamot for use of underage magic defending himself from your friend Snape and his neuroses. This is a mistake Albus, and I want you to remember what I just said so that next week you'll be quiet when I'm telling 'I told you so' while we're cleaning up another Snape mess."

The room was deadly silent as Remus and Dumbledore stared at one another. Pretty much everyone in the room agreed with what Remus had said, but they were not used to Dumbledore being challenged in such a way. Fred, George, and Bill Weasley couldn't (or wouldn't) stop the smiles of satisfaction from their faces.

"Be that as it may Remus, my decision stands. I am confident that both Severus and Harry can work together long enough to see this part through."

Remus didn't respond, much to the disappointment of the Weasley sons, and the meeting went on for another 30 minutes, discussing more mundane matters. After it was over, Remus pulled Bill and the twins aside.

"Have any of you heard from Harry?"

"No we haven't," George replied, "He's been silent as the grave.....though we'd better not let Ron and Ginny know about Luna, they'll hex him into next week."

"I think she's good for him on the whole, I imagine she doesn't badger him with questions about his feelings and about the war," Bill noted.

They all nodded. Fred and George had told the Order that they couldn't believe Luna of all people was handy in a Death Eater attack.....though they could have said the same thing about Neville as well.

"Bill, next time you're on guard duty (Fred and George had declined guard duty shifts because of the opening of their business) approach Harry and try to see what's going on with him. I got a letter from him yesterday and he wasn't too happy with me.....or any of us for that matter. Something about this bothers me guys, last summer was mad beyond belief because we left him alone, now he wants little to do with us."

"Are you worried that he might try something foolish?" Bill asked.

"Not exactly Bill, I just have a funny feeling that there's more going on there than meets the eye. I don't want Dumbledore to know about this, he and Harry are having some difficulties and that's where I think a lot of this is coming from, Harry just doesn't trust us anymore.....if he ever did."

"My next shift is tomorrow afternoon Remus, I'll look in on him then. It will be interesting to see those muggles I've heard so much about."

Fred and George grinned, and said in unison, "Say hi to Dudley for us!" Bill laughed, and added that he would bring some candy along with him this time. That brought a smile to Remus' face for the first time, and they parted, the twins to go back to their store, so they could send Ron home. Bill went off to his girlfriend's place (not Fleur, that is so tired), Remus went upstairs for a nap, the full moon 3 days earlier had still tired him.

Saturday, July 21, 1996

Privet Drive, 2:00 pm

Vernon Dursley sat in his kitchen chair, eating his lunch and wondering what the heck was happening. He had returned home yesterday to his normal house and his normal life, other than his freak nephew. He was astounded when Petunia had told him about Peter

Tyson's visit and what was to happen today. His first instinct was to say no, no freak was going to tell him what to do, but one thing stuck in his mind 'you will like this conversation'. That gave Vernon pause, those freaks knew that the only way he would like the conversation was if it meant getting Potter out of here forever.....surely they couldn't mean that? Not that Vernon didn't dearly wish for that, but he knew that Dumbledore wasn't big on respecting his wishes. Vernon wasn't so dumb that he wasn't aware that most of his hate of Harry came from habit, after all the kid was such a quiet little thing, didn't eat much, and from what Petunia said hadn't even left the house since he got back from that place. He sighed and decided to just find out when he found out, the freak was supposed to be here in 30 minutes, he could wait that long.

The doorbell rang. Petunia went to answer it, wondering if it was that wizard here early. It was:

"Hello Mrs. Dursley, lovely to see you again."

Out in the yard, under an invisibility cloak, Bill Weasley was thunderstruck, was this who he thought it was? He remembered Tonks' description of yesterday's visitor, and this matched it, but his eyes must be playing tricks. He hadn't seen Peter in about a year, though they continued to exchange their monthly owls, catching each other up. Bill had only been permanently living in London for a month now, and he, Peter and his wife were due to have dinner the next night. He reacted as quickly as he could when he saw Peter disappear inside.

The doorbell rang again, 10 seconds after Tyson had walked through the door and was saying hello to Vernon Dursley.

"I know you, you're one of those Weasleys from the train station."

"Yes Mrs. Dursley, I'm Bill, may I come in?" He didn't wait for a reply and walked in....."Peter, what on earth are you doing here?"

Harry went pale and Peter didn't look much better, Vernon and Petunia just looked confused. They had never met Bill before and

Vernon was still getting used to the idea of Peter looking so normal for a wizard.

"I could ask you the same Bill, its good to see you," Peter replied, deciding to keep Bill off balance. The 2 approached each other and shook hands warmly. The two shared wary smiles, Bill was slowly realizing what was going on here, while Peter knew exactly what Bill was doing there, he was Harry's guard dog for the afternoon. He turned to Vernon and Petunia:

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley I apologize for the confusion, I'm aware I said 2:30 and I'm early, but I wanted to confirm a few things with Harry in private before we talked, so I told him I would be here at 2 pm. If you would be kind enough to give us some time to talk we'll be back down here at the appointed time. I stress again to you both: You will like this conversation. Will your son be joining us?" He hadn't seen Dudley yet and was admittedly curious after hearing Harry describe him.

"Yes he will Mr. Tyson, after what happened last summer we feel he has a right to know what's going on."

"That's fine Mrs. Dursley, I happen to agree with you completely on that. If you will excuse us, Harry, Bill and I will go upstairs and have our meeting. We will be back down soon. Our talk with you won't take too long, so any evening plans you have will not be interrupted."

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other and nodded to Peter, the wizards proceeded up the stairs and into Harry's room.

Peter made sure to let Bill go in before him and made a quick move to grab Bill's wand, and before Bill knew what happened, Peter was holding on to it. Harry closed the door behind them all and Peter reinforced Dobby's silencing charm on the room.

"Ok Peter, what the bloody hell is going on here? You were the guy here yesterday weren't you?"

"Yes I was Bill, I see there must have been an Order meeting yesterday, your colleagues took note of me?"

"Yes they did, though they pegged you for a muggle visitor, they had no idea you were here to see Harry."

Peter looked at Harry and said, "Well Harry, have you thought about what we talked about, letting one of them on the inside? Now is the time to decide."

Harry had thought about it all last night, what to do about telling a friend. Again, he had gone over the list of his friends in his mind, and boiled them down to 5 that he could dare confide in: Fred, George, Luna, Neville, and Bill.....Bill only because he and Peter were friends (Charlie is still in Romania at this time) and Harry had liked how cool he was. He looked at the two of them and decided:

"Yes Peter, we can tell him.....as long as we have his word that he won't tell anyone that we don't want him to."

"Well Bill, is what we tell you going to stay between us? I don't want to have to threaten you, but you can't tell Dumbledore or his minions about this at all. I assure you its nothing heinous or illegal, in fact Harry is bending over backward to keep it legal. Its your choice Bill, we want you on our side."

Bill wasn't as torn as one might think, Fred and George had been working on him ever since summer ended and he was becoming quite the Harry partisan. He had been appalled while listening to the twins describe how Harry was treated here, and was more than willing to get him out of here if that's what was going on.

"Ok, you've got my word, I'm on your side and I won't tell anyone that you disapprove of.....but I want the twins to be let in on this Harry, you don't know this but they're your biggest advocates in the Order.....plus you're their business partner, they will always stick with you."

"That's fine Bill, but I want to be the one to tell them, not you, we'll set this up as soon as possible with them, and Luna and Neville too, I want their help as well."

Bill noted the names Harry mentioned, and couldn't help but notice the absence of some significant ones.

"What about Ron and Hermione? What happened between you three?"

"It's complicated Bill, I'll explain it all to you I promise, but they can't know anything until its done and settled."

"Fair enough, you've got my curiosity aroused completely, what's going on?"

"I'm leaving Britain Bill, I'm dealing myself out of this war."

I thank all of you that have read and reviewed so far, its very gratifying to get your opinions. And back to the show:

“Ok, of all the things you could have told me Harry, that was the one I wasn’t expecting. Is this for real?”

“Do you see me smiling Bill? This is no joke.”

Bill looked at the faces around him and indeed no one was smiling. He closed his eyes and silently cursed Dumbledore for putting them all in this situation. He had no doubt that the old man had dropped some kind of bomb on Harry at the end of the term that put him in the mind-set, he and the twins had speculated on it but couldn’t come up with anything definitive.

“What happened Harry? What changed you? Peter, what do you have to do with this?”

Peter and Harry looked at each other, expecting the other to speak first. Peter nodded at Harry and he began:

“I’m 15 years old Bill, and in the last year I’ve watched 2 friends die, one of whom was also my godfather. I’ve been the most hated person in our world; been possessed by Voldemort; had a blood quill used on me by some psychopath who had official permission to torture me; and oh yeah, I was banned, along with your brothers, from Quidditch for defending your mother from the slandering of a Death Eater in training.....all of this happened in the last 13 months Bill, that is what has changed.” Harry’s voice had grown more and more hateful as he spoke, chilling Bill with its tone.

“Why would I want to stay in a school, in a society that would allow ANY of that to happen, let alone all of it? I might consider staying in Britain if I didn’t have to return to Hogwarts Bill, but I’ve been incredibly lucky to survive my five years there and I’m not sure I want to press my luck.”

“Harry, what did Dumbledore lay on you in his office?”

Harry's and Peter's jaws dropped as they stared open mouthed at Bill. How did he know about that? What the heck happened? Harry reacted first, with a rage Bill had never seen before in the brief time he'd known him.

"How on earth did you know about that?!? What has that \$##& told the Order?!?!?"

"Easy Harry, we don't want any accidental magic to happen, I'd rather not be blown up like your Aunt Marge."

Talk about the wrong thing to say, Peter had to physically restrain Harry from punching Bill for that one. He rolled his eyes at his friend and commented:

"Save the witty repartee for your witch of the moment Bill, let's not provoke things we don't have to provoke ok?"

"I'm sorry Harry, that was poorly timed, forgive me?" Bill hit him with that Weasley grin of his, and Harry couldn't help but smile back and nod his head.

"His language aside, Harry asked very relevant questions Bill, what do you know and how do you know it?"

"First of all guys, Dumbledore hasn't said much of anything to us about regarding you Harry. We've only had the two Order meetings since the Department of Mysteries and pretty much all that gets said about you are reports from the watchers outside; and when he told us that Snape was coming here next week for Occlumency. You should know that no one in my family is especially happy about that Harry, and individually we've told Dumbledore as much. Ron is who told me Harry, he was in the hospital when you got back from Dumbledore's office, but Seamus and Dean noticed that you seemed quite upset. They told Ron the next day when he got back to the dorm. He and Hermione watched you pretty carefully and agreed that you seemed as much angry as you were sad. Sad they could understand, having watched what happened to Sirius.....angry was what they couldn't understand, they didn't think that Sirius' death was something that you would be angry about. Ron told the twins when he got home, and

they told me. Fred, George and I have been pooling our information about you lately, we're on your side Harry, and I have no doubt that if Charlie was here he would be as well, I can speak for him."

"I don't know what to say Bill.....I never realized that Ron was so observant."

"Oh c'mon Harry, think about what you just said. Ron is the one person who should know you the best, he's been your best mate for 5 years. I think you owe him a little better than that, and that doesn't even touch on how you've been ignoring him the last 2 weeks."

"He ignored me most of last summer Bill.....and before you say it, I know he was doing it on Dumbledore's orders, but he still could have found a way to owl me if he had wanted to."

"Is that what your silence to him is about Harry? Payback?"

"No Bill, its not payback.....well not merely payback. Answer me this: if push came to shove Bill, and Ron had to support me, or support the combined efforts of Hermione, your parents, and Dumbledore, who would he choose?"

Bill considered this for a moment, he had never thought of the problem framed as Harry had framed it.

"I don't know Harry, I never thought about it like that. Is that really how you see it, all of those people, my parents even, lined up against you?"

"Answer my question first Bill, then I'll tell you what I'm thinking, and why."

"Since you put it that way Harry, I don't know who Ron would side with.....that's a lot on the 'other side' that would be swaying him, but I know how much he cares about you."

"That's the problem Bill, I don't know who he would side with either, and until I do, I just can't share my plans with him. Heck, if push came to shove I don't know whether he would pick me over just Hermione,

let alone everyone else. You and I both know that if I try to leave Britain, legally or illegally, Dumbledore is going to try to stop me, by any means at his disposal. Your mother and father are very closely allied with Dumbledore, your family is a very old, pureblood family, one of the few openly on his side. Your mother, bless her heart and I love her to pieces, would agree that I belong here, no matter what my wishes would be. And your father Bill, he would do what she said, I know how it is in your family.”

Bill chuckled at that, of all the Weasley children he was probably the closest to his father, partly from having come first, partly from the fact that Bill looked at his father and saw his humanity, and how it attracted people. Arthur Weasley was not the most ambitious wizard in their society, but he was one of the most liked and well thought of.....but Bill acknowledged the truth in what Harry said:

“You’re right Harry, I guess I’ve never thought about it that way. In your place I would be a little cautious around Ron as well. Why are you putting Hermione so solidly in Dumbledore’s camp? Do you really think she’s against you?”

“It’s not so much that she’s against me Bill, but that’s she’s so much for Dumbledore. You’re not around her on a daily basis, she thinks the man walks on water. She’s read Hogwarts a History too many times I suppose. Over the years Ron and I have loosened her up to the point that she’ll break rules.....but none that Dumbledore lays down. Our first year and the ‘no going up on the 3rd floor corridor or you will suffer a most painful death’, she only violated that by accident, and when something had to be done and Dumbledore wasn’t around to tell. That’s the only time she’s come close Bill, and I know that if Dumbledore told her to draw her wand on me, for my own good he’d say of course.....she’d do it.”

He showed Bill and Peter the 2 letters he’d gotten from Hermione, badgering him for information on what he was feeling and if his scar had hurt. They looked at each other and nodded, it certainly looked like Harry at least had justification for thinking that way.

"I see your point Harry, I do. I'd like your acquiescence to at least sound out Ron....only in the vaguest of terms at first, but at least let me try."

Harry sighed, Bill had tugged on his heart strings in a most able way. Harry didn't want to keep Ron out of the loop, and he knew that the consequences for their friendship would be terrible if Ron learned about the plan after the fact. He had to at least try.

"Ok Bill, I'll leave it to your judgment on that....but I want you to be prepared to use a memory charm if you have to, if it looks like Ron will betray us."

"Fair enough Harry.....now no more delaying, I want to know what Dumbledore told you, what made you so angry with and distrustful of him."

Harry girded himself, and told Bill the Prophecy. Bill listened to it with horrified fascination, putting his head in his hands as he heard the last of it.

"I suppose its way to much to hope that you made that up just to amuse yourself?"

The others smiled, Harry could understand why people responded to Bill, he had a way of making things less tense. He shook his head in the negative, as Bill looked up.

"So this is why it has been so important to protect you all these years? Dumbledore believes you're the final weapon against Voldemort?"

"Yep, in a nutshell that's it. I'm stuck here, under the blood protection of my aunt, so that no Death Eater or Voldemort himself can harm me. The old man has gotten a bit sloppy at school though, given how many times I've almost been killed there. I'm not sure I believe in the Prophecy Bill, but I appear to be the only major player who feels that way."

"Well it explains a lot, that's for certain. Is that why you want to leave?"

"I want to leave Bill, because I don't trust any of the people who've been making decisions on my behalf. I also would prefer to go to a school where I'm not famous and the epicenter of everything that happens. In other words, I want to be a normal teenager for a couple of years. If the war is still going on when I'm done with school.....well I might be open to cooperating with the Order, though I will never join it as long as Dumbledore is leading it."

Bill sighed again, he was getting good at that particular emotion. Between Ron and the twins, Bill had a pretty good idea of Harry's adventures and sufferings over the years, and he had witnessed firsthand the aftermath of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He didn't really blame the kid for wanting out of something he'd never signed up for in the first place.

"Ok Harry, that doesn't change what I said before: I'm with you. What's the plan?"

Harry looked at Peter, who took a shrunken bag out of his pocket and enlarged it.

"Here are those books I promised you Harry, there are 10 total: Five of them are on advanced Defense, including an Auror training manual from 3 years ago; Two are on history, like you asked for, they detail most of our wars and many of our great wizards and witches; Two are on Occlumency, those I want you to start first; The last one is a career handbook, you need to figure out what to do with your life once school ends. I know you have enough money that you don't have to work, but you need to fill your days with something. I'm coming here for your Occlumency lesson at 5pm on Monday, that gives you 50 hours to memorize those books. Looking around here it doesn't appear as if you have much else to do, and the books aren't that thick, maybe 400 pages between them. I want you to at least know the principles and theories behind it before we have your first lesson."

"Ok, next phase: what to do about Snape. How much do you hate Snape Harry?"

"More than anyone in the world not named Voldemort. I hate him even more than Bellatrix Lestrange or my relatives."

"Well that's certainly definitive isn't it. The plan I have in mind is to send our friend Dumbledore a note next week, probably Thursday, saying that Snape isn't welcome here. We'll get you and your Aunt and Uncle to sign it, something tells me they won't be averse to the idea of banning a particular wizard from their home."

"Dumbledore and Snape won't care about that Peter, they'll simply ignore it like they do every other Dursley complaint," Harry pointed out. Peter grinned broadly:

"That's the point Harry, Snape will come here in direct violation of the wishes of the owners of the house.....even in our world Harry, that's against the law."

Harry and Bill looked at each other with slight confusion, they knew this was going somewhere fun, but couldn't quite tell where. Peter put them out of their misery.

"As soon as Snape shows up, alone I'm going to assume, we send one of your elves, with a pre-prepared note, straight to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The head of that department is one Amelia Bones, who is, if I'm not mistaken Bill, not an Order of the Phoenix member."

Bill nodded, and Peter went on:

"The note will say, in so many words, that Snape is there against everyone's wishes but his, and is threatening you with his wand, whilst knowing that you're not allowed to use yours. I daresay you won't have to do much to elicit this threat Harry, but goad him if you need to. With any luck he'll try to curse you right as the Aurors show up to investigate, we can't be having the 'Boy Who Lived' assaulted in his own home, by a Hogwarts Professor no less."

Bill and Harry burst out laughing as Peter sat back looking very satisfied with himself. Harry was the first to catch his breath.

“Oh that is so very, very, very cruel Peter.....I love it. Are you sure you weren’t a Slytherin?”

Peter grinned and shook his head in the negative. Bill was next:

“You really think we can pull that off? I mean, you have Snape pegged pretty well, I have no trouble believing that he would do everything you described.....but what if the DMLE doesn’t respond as quickly as you think, or respond at all? After all, the Aurors on duty might include Tonks or Kingsley.”

“That’s why we’re going to have a backup plan Bill.....us. That day I’m going to file a petition with the Ministry of Magic to have Harry legally emancipated. Ideally I’m going to do that as close to Snape’s visit as possible, so that they don’t have advance warning. Snape being arrested will be a very demonstrative way of showing that Harry isn’t safe at Hogwarts, when one of its professors, Dumbledore’s pet, has attacked him in front of his muggle family. We might even arrange for The Daily Prophet and The Quibbler to get some photos, taken on the sly of course. Harry will feed his close friend Luna’s father (Harry blushed at that comment) an exclusive recount of the events, and chaos will ensue, making our young friend here a martyr for the abuses at our beloved alma mater.”

Bill was awestruck at how well thought out this plan seemed to be, except for one thing:

“What do you mean ‘us’?”

“I mean that if the Aurors don’t respond like we want them to, you and I will have to step in. Snape is capable of harming Harry you know, and he would have a good time doing it too. Plus, we can’t allow Snape to incapacitate Harry and start in with the Occlumency, he’d find out our plans easily enough and run off to his mentor and start blabbing. Plus there’s the real possibility that Snape might be working for the other side. Harry told me that he wouldn’t put it past Snape to kidnap him and deliver him to Voldemort, such a feat would put

Snape above all other Death Eaters, he'd be set for life if he wished. Dumbledore might be insane enough to allow Snape to be alone with Harry, that doesn't mean we have to let him. I have every confidence that Snape is a good duelist, but I don't see him taking out both you and I at the same time Bill."

"Now Harry, on Monday when I get to the office I'm going to send some owls to various schools in America. I want permission from you to ask my wife about this, she has relatives over there that can better tell us about the benefits of the various schools. All I really know is that there are 4 wizarding equivalents of Hogwarts in the United States, plus another in Canada.....speaking of which, I noticed that you have a vault in Toronto, do you know anything about that?"

"I have no idea Peter, it's the first I've ever heard of it. I know nothing really about my family histories, though I have to assume that it's a Potter vault, not an Evans one. And yes, you can tell your wife about it, I'd figured that you had already."

"No I didn't Harry, I take my professional word very seriously, though I did tell her that I've taken you on as a client of course. She asked me what you were like as person, though not about the case, she knows enough not to. She remembered your mother, from when she taught at Hogwarts, my wife was a Hufflepuff in Bill's year, one ahead of mine. Do you remember Lily Potter, Bill?"

"Yes I do.....in fact I remember when she was pregnant with you Harry. Kids would come up to her and pat her belly (Bill smiled in remembrance), we weren't used to having a teacher at Hogwarts young enough to be pregnant. I was in my first year and I was in awe of her, wife of a famous Quidditch star, teacher at Hogwarts, and only 20 years old, it was amazing to us. I never got a chance to have her as a teacher Harry, I was a 3rd year when she went into hiding and soon thereafter was killed. Runes was my specialty and I would have gotten to know her pretty well.....and you too I guess, had she lived, had none of this mess ever happened." Bill's eyes misted up, as did Harry's. Bill continued:

"Peter, do you remember the night Harry defeated Voldemort? I can still see it, like it just happened. Professor Flitwick made the

announcement at the Halloween feast “Voldemort has been defeated!! Harry Potter has destroyed the Dark Lord!!” The entire hall went into a massive cheer, even most of the Slytherins looked happy. We all hugged each other and threw pumpkin juice up in the air. I found Charlie, he was a first year then, and he was so happy that he was crying.....and Harry, this was a kid who never cried for any reason. Flitwick didn’t give us any details of what happened and we didn’t care, the celebration went on through the night, the professors just sat there in a daze and didn’t bother trying to send us to our beds. The next morning at breakfast we found out the reason for that daze, as Dumbledore explained to us what happened, and why one of our most popular teachers and her husband were never coming back. As loud as the hall had been the night before Harry, that’s how silent it was after he told us. Gryffindor House went into mourning, and it lasted all year. We didn’t care about Quidditch or House Cups or any of that bother. Our icons were dead and our little brother orphaned, it was a large price to pay to get rid of Voldemort Harry.....I have to wonder if some of the disbelief this past year that he was back stems from that, such a high price paid, and ultimately for nothing, just for a delay.”

“Bill, why is it that no one else will talk to me the way you 2 do? I’ve learned more about my parents and about our world in the last 2 days than from 5 years of conversations with Remus, Sirius, Hagrid, Dumbledore and all the rest, even your parents.”

“I don’t know Harry, I wish I did. Maybe its just bad luck, maybe the others have been under some kind of instruction from Dumbledore to mushroom you, I don’t know. I know my parents think of you like another son and only want to protect you.....but now that I’ve listened to you, I don’t know if that’s what you’ve needed. I know that Sirius and Remus were/are very dependant on the old man for their survival, it wouldn’t take much to keep them quiet. They could always rationalize by thinking they could tell you when you grew up.”

Peter looked at his watch, it was almost 2:30pm.

“Ok, we can’t afford to keep your relatives waiting much longer Harry, we need to wrap this up. Bill, when is your next guard shift after today?”

"Monday night, staring at 6 pm I think."

"Perfect, I'll still be here and we can finalize our plans. I want you to tell Fred and George to get over here as well, have them close the shop early if need be. Harry, if you want your friends Luna and Neville to be in on this, I suggest you owl them tomorrow and have them take the Knight Bus over here. Bill only bring Ron if you're positive about him, and I mean dead positive, we don't want to have to Obliviate him if we don't have to. Your OWL results should have arrived by then, so we'll know better what your options are. Make sure that Luna and Neville don't get here before the shift change to Bill, we don't know if Dumbledore will allow you visitors or not and I would prefer not to find out if we don't have to. Everyone clear?"

Bill and Harry looked at each other, nodded, and snapped off identical military salutes, in unison they cried:

"Yes sir!!"

Everyone in the room dissolved into laughter as they left the room and headed downstairs. They saw Harry's relatives in the living room and entered it, Peter spoke up:

"Ok Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, let's get started. Is Dudley going to join us?"

Before they could answer Dudley came in from the kitchen, he flinched when he saw Bill's red hair, memories of the Ton Tongue Toffee coming back to him, but he rallied and approached Peter with his hand outstretched. They shook, and he did the same with Bill.

"Good to meet you Dudley, I'm Peter Tyson, Harry's solicitor, this is Bill Weasley, a friend of Harry's. You must be wondering what this is all about, its simple: This is about getting Harry out of here and him never coming back.....ever."

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other very hopefully, they had discussed this possibility the night before, but couldn't believe that it would be that easy. If there was one thing that they had learned in

their dealings with the wizarding world: What they wanted didn't matter one bit. Vernon made the first Dursley sally into the conversation:

"Just how are you going to do that? That old man ordered us to keep him here."

"We're going to do this the old-fashioned way Mr. Dursley, we're going to do it legally. We are going to file a petition with the wizard equivalent of your Child Social Services agency, hopefully obtain a positive ruling, then do the same in your world, and then Harry will be free, and I have no doubt that once he's free he will elect to move out, as he has made us aware that you and he aren't the closest."

Vernon had to smile at that one, he looked over at Harry and decided that the kid wasn't as dumb as he'd thought, he'd either planned this out very well, or found someone who could. He still thought it sounded too easy though:

"Is that all? You really think it will go that smoothly? What about that Dumbledore fellow, won't he object?"

"Oh he most certainly will. I feel though, that a combination of legal tactics and not so judicious threats will either bring him in line, or we'll prevail in spite of him."

"This still sounds too good to be true.....what do you want from us?"

"Just to sign your name to a few pieces of paper, and put up with having a few wizards visiting your home for the next week or 2."

"How is the boy paying you? We don't give him any allowance to pay for solicitors."

"Harry will work it off by volunteering in my office next summer, I have a lot of little things around there that I could use some help with, he'll pay my bill that way."

Harry admired the smooth way Peter had come up with that, and tried to look as though this wasn't news to him. Vernon wasn't even

looking at him, he was lost in thought as he contemplated what he'd heard. Petunia spoke up:

"Won't the boy be in danger if he doesn't come back next summer? That's what Dumbledore has been saying all of these years."

"Well yes, Mrs. Dursley, Harry will be in greater danger.....but he is prepared to accept that as part and parcel of the deal. Let me assure you Harry isn't simply doing this to sever ties with you, he has some issues in our world that make him need to have more legal say than he has. That said, you have made him fully aware of your aversion to anything 'wizardy', and he is willing to respect your wishes by leaving.....going through these proceedings will allow him to. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, you must have realized by now that whenever Harry becomes of age, be it next year in our world, 1998 in yours.....Dumbledore will keep putting him here for whatever time is needed to renew these blood protections.....in spite of the fact that everyone in this house wishes otherwise." Vernon nodded at the logic of that statement, he'd been dreading that same thing for years, ever since Harry had gone to Hogwarts."

"You're right Mr. Tyson.....but what are you going to do to protect us from Dumbledore if we let Harry do as he wants? He'll blame us somehow for the boy's doings."

"Mr. Dursley you raise an excellent point, and I'll tell you this: he won't do a thing, he can't. If it got out that he had harmed you in any way he'd be finished. Now I'm not going to lie to you Mr. Dursley, this might not work, we might not get Harry emancipated, there are no guarantees in this process. That said, we are going to try, and like I said, all we need from you is a few signatures when the time comes. With any luck, this will all be settled by Harry's birthday on the 31st."

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other again, what did they have to lose? If it failed it simply meant a continuation of the status quo, if it succeeded.....happiness, with no wizards around them forever. Vernon looked at Harry:

"Ok Harry, I know that you and I rarely agree on anything.....but we agree on this. We'll sign what we have to in order to make this happen.....I promise."

Harry stood up and approached Vernon Dursley, the bane of his existence for years. He steeled himself and reached out his hand to Vernon.....with a blank look on his face Vernon shook it. They were in this as a family, hopefully the last thing they did as a family together.

Luna is going to be making her Final Straw debut in this chapter and I just can't get my writing head around her vague talk, so she's going to appear more normal than she does in canon, or in most stories. Let's just say for the sake of argument that the DOM knocked her back on kilter a little bit.

Monday, July 23, 1996

Privet Drive 4:30 pm

Harry laid on his bed and re-read his Occlumency notes for what seemed like the 20th time. The books that Peter had given him, A Beginner's Guide to Organizing Your Mind, and Advanced Theories of Occlumency, had been very helpful, and Harry had taken over 20 pages of notes in the muggle-style notebook that Aunt Petunia had given him. More than once Harry had had a 'light bulb' moment when reading these books, and not for the first time cursed that numb-wit Snape and his "Clear your mind Potter" crap.

It turns out that Occlumency is not about clearing the mind at all, it involves setting up defenses and barriers, for the twin purpose of: keeping memories tucked away; and more easily forcing intruders from the mind. It was much like a muggle alarm system Harry realized, involving detection, protection, and eviction. All clearing your mind did was allow the intruder to stick around longer, without fear of penalty and give them time to find what they're looking for. Harry wondered if Snape's way of 'teaching' was really how he had learned, he would have to run this by Peter when he arrived, the 'Snape as triple agent' theory that the two had been bouncing around was gaining more and more credence.

The day before, Harry had sent Hedwig on her rounds, with letters to Luna and Neville, asking them to show up today at 6:30 pm:

Dear Luna/Neville,

Hi there, how are things going? I'm having a small get-together at my relatives house tomorrow at 6:30 pm. I have some thing that I'm working on and I would like your input and advice. The best way I can think of to get here is to take The Knight Bus and say you need to go

to Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. They've picked me up here once before, so it shouldn't be a bother. I'm also inviting Neville/Luna, so hopefully you'll see them on the bus as well.

I must ask you this though, please keep this invitation to yourself. I know that you likely will have to tell your father/grandmother, but please no one else. I'm not sure if my wizard jailers here will allow me visitors, but I have that part arranged, as long as no one on the outside finds out. The meeting shouldn't last too long, afterward we sit around and catch-up, it will be good to see you again.

If you're in, just do nothing and send Hedwig along to her next stop. If you can't make it, write me a note saying so and give it Hedwig and we'll figure something out for another time.

See you soon,

Harry

PS: Neville, our OWL results should be there by the time you come by, bring yours and we can compare, hopefully we did pretty well.

Hedwig had returned from her Ottery St. Catchpole to Brighton (where Neville lived) to Surrey run in short order, with no notes attached to her, so Harry assumed that everything was a go. His own OWL results hadn't come yet, which was putting on edge a bit. Even if he didn't return to Hogwarts.....if, because he hadn't missed Peter's caution to the Dursleys that this scheme might not work.....he would need good grades to get into whatever school in North America that he wanted to go to.

Harry had also written short letters to Ron and Hermione, telling them in vague terms that he was having a decent summer. He hadn't mentioned a whiff of his plans, and had resisted temptation to throw a false bone at Hermione, to try and smoke her out. He had talked about how there had been no Voldemort visions, that he and the Dursleys were engaged in a form of détente (though not why), and that he had come to grips with what had happened to Sirius.....all of which was true, more or less. Harry rationalized that he wasn't exactly lying to his closest friends, he was just telling them only

certain true things. He had seen on a muggle American cop show, how they make you tell ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’, but in reality the truth and nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth might sound like a lie, but really wasn’t. He knew that Ron and Hermione would not appreciate that kind of hair-splitting, but he decided to kick that can when he came to it.

Tap, Tap, Tap

Harry looked up at the slight noise, there was someone at the door. He went up to open it and saw Dudley there.

“Hey Dudley, no work today?” Dudley’s job at the cinema had become a all consuming thing, so much so that Harry wondered if there was a particular girl there that Duds was interested in. He’d been putting in over 50 hours per week there since he’d returned home (muggle schools letting out 2 weeks before Hogwarts in most years), in addition to all of the free movies that he was watching. Harry himself was itching to see Independence Day, after seeing posters all over King’s Cross when he had returned from school.

“No, not today. I usually take one day off a week and its been Mondays, since it’s the time when we’re the least busy.”

Harry looked at Dudley a bit more closely. He had lost quite a bit of weight over the last 2 years, and while no one would call him thin, he could (with baggy clothes) be thought of as simply husky. There was also a calmness to his cousin that he hadn’t noticed before. Usually Dudley sneered at him, when he bothered to look at him at all. Now though, Dudley was looking at him with curiosity, as if he too was seeing his cousin for the first time, or in a new light.

“What’s on your mind Dudley?”

“Are you really leaving next week? Forever?” To Harry’s great surprise, his cousin didn’t look gleeful at the prospect, if anything he looked a bit concerned.

“If everything works out as we hope to, yes. I’ll be gone sometime in the middle of next week. We’re doing our court petition at the end of

this week like Peter mentioned Saturday.....after that is when the fireworks are going to start.”

“I heard Mom and Dad talking yesterday....they’re worried about you Harry, they think that bad wizard your lot are so worried about are going to get you now, since you won’t be here.”

Harry had never been more flabbergasted in his life, so much so that he couldn’t help the words that came out of his mouth next:

“What do they care? I would have thought that they’d be happy about that.”

Dudley looked at him like he was about to unload on him for saying that, but his face changed and he didn’t.

“I guess I don’t blame you for thinking that Harry, I know none of us have been very nice to you over the years. I mean, no matter what may have gone on between all of us.....none of us want you dead. After all this time would it make a difference if I said I’m sorry? The brutal truth is that while I’m sorry now Harry, I can’t really say I was sorry then.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference in me wanting to leave Dud, but it would be nice to hear if you really mean it.”

“Then I’m sorry Harry.....I never knew you were a wizard until that giant man came and told us, I just knew that Mom hated your mom and dad. I don’t think Dad even met them more than a few times, but he didn’t like them for some reason.....a reason that I found out when you did, like I said. I saw pretty early on that the meaner I was to you, the better things would be for me. Anytime I wanted something new all I had to do was do something to you and I would get it. Maybe deep down I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but it was pretty deep.” Dudley sighed and continued:

“Part of it might also have been that I was afraid that Mom and Dad would turn on me too if I was nice to you, they weren’t going to like you no matter how close you and I were. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m telling you all of this now. You probably think that it doesn’t

mean much now, since you're leaving, and maybe it doesn't.....but every time I think about last summer, and I think about it everyday, I remember that you saved my life, or my soul, or whatever those Dementor things take. The irony of the whole thing, and that meeting the other day made me think of this, is that if you'd let them get me....you'd have been out of here forever just like you're wanting. Mom and Dad never would let you come back, no matter what your school guy said."

Harry was at a loss for words, the thought behind the words aside, Harry had had no idea that Dudley was this articulate. He knew Smeltings was a good school, some of it must have rubbed off. Harry smiled:

"You've been practicing that speech haven't you?" Dudley laughed:

"A bit yeah, but I meant it. I'm not that good at speeches, I didn't do so well in my Speech and Communications class at Smeltings, but I did learn a lot in it. Speaking of speaking (they both snickered), you know this is probably the longest conversation we've ever had?"

"And it only took 15 years.....well, 14 after we learned to talk."

The doorbell rang, both of them knew it was Peter coming for Harry's Occlumency lesson. Dudley made to leave Harry's room.

"Let's hope that it doesn't take another 14 years to have another one."

"Yeah, I know what you mean Dud.....oh yeah, the Weasley twins will be here later on tonight, I'll tell them not to do anything to you, but just make sure that you don't eat anything tonight that you're not sure of, Ok?"

To Harry's surprise Dudley burst out laughing, Dudley really had grown up, and gotten a real sense of humor in the bargain, this was nice to see.

"I don't suppose they'd give me some of their stuff, so I could take it to school?"

"I'll ask, but I don't think so, you'd have a hard time explaining the effects of some of their products."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Worth a try though. See you later Harry, don't blow anyone up." With that Dudley opened the door to see Peter there, they exchanged greetings and traded places, with Peter sitting down on Harry's bed.

"Getting along with them better? He doesn't quite come across as the monster you made him out to be."

"I think the prospect of me leaving has given all four of us a bit of a pause, Dudley more so than his parents. I think if none of this emancipation stuff had come up Dudley might still have been easier to deal with than in the past. My aunt and uncle.....I don't know about them, I'll just be glad to be away from them."

"Are Luna and Neville coming tonight? Have you gotten your OWL results yet?"

"Yes and no. Luna and Neville are coming tonight as far as I know, and the OWL owl hasn't gotten here yet. I read over the Occlumency books you gave me, I made some notes if you want to look at them." Harry handed over his notebook and watched Peter try to decipher his chicken scratch.

"Well it looks like you're understanding what to do. I think Snape's half baked lessons probably opened your mind more to Voldemort, not less. 'Clear your mind' and nothing else, honestly." Peter shook his head in exasperation. "Ok, are you ready to begin building your barriers and alarms? Today and probably tomorrow I'm only going to be lightly probing your defenses, making you aware that there's an invasion in the first place so you can have everything in place as quickly as possible. Then on Wednesday and Thursday we're going to practice with me doing full out assaults. This doesn't have to be complete Harry, but given that we have only 4 days to do this, and for only an hour at a pop at that. I would schedule more, but as you discovered with Snape, learning this tends to tire out your mind. I know Voldemort hasn't tried anything so far this summer, but that's

not bound to last. It wouldn't do to have you more vulnerable to his tinkering. I have little doubt that if he tried it tonight while you're in bed, he'd find out what's going on here. That's a chance we'll have to take though.....though I don't think he'd rat you out to Dumbledore Harry." They both smiled at that one, knowing that however much hatred Voldemort had for Harry, he hated Dumbledore 10 times as much.

They spent the next hour practicing barriers. Peter put very little force in his Legilimancy, getting Harry accustomed to another presence in his mind before actually moving about in it. Snape had adopted to use the 'throw them in off the deep end and see if they swim' technique, the same technique he used in his potions classes to varying degrees. Peter preferred to dip Harry's head in and let him be wet for awhile before making him do any work.

It was now 6:00 pm and Peter signaled that they were finished.

"That was a good start Harry, I think by Friday you'll be fine.....as long as we can get rid of your favorite professor quickly enough. Bill should be getting here any minute, and the twins too."

Just then, a tapping could be heard on the bedroom window. Winky went over to open it and let the large grey owl inside. The owl had with him (it was a him, don't ask me how) an official looking envelope with the twin crests of the Ministry of Magic and The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry took the envelope with shaking hands, and the grey owl went on his way. The doorbell rang at the same time, Peter went downstairs to go get Bill.

Harry looked at the envelope with dread, all of the sudden he began to think that he hadn't done very well. Reason after reason invaded his mind about why he had done badly on this test or that. He waited for the others to come up so that he could have some moral support.

The bedroom door opened again and the room was full of Weasleys, well 3 of them anyway. Bill came first, followed by Fred and George. To Harry's disappointment there was no Ron.

"Hiya there mate," Gred and Forge said in unison, each slapping Harry on the shoulder. They looked around the room they had broken Harry out of 4 years earlier. Fred said:

"It looks better without the bars on the window Harry, that wasn't a nice decorative touch."

Harry pointed to the wall around the window, the scars of the bars were still there as the twins admired their handiwork. Bill saw Harry looking questioningly at him.

"I'm sorry Harry, I didn't get much of a chance to talk with Ron, Hermione was there yesterday and most of today. I can tell you that they're pretty worried about you, they commented on your lovely vague letters that they got yesterday. Hermione, surprise, surprise, was on pins and needles waiting for the owl scores. I told them I was going to talk to you tonight, so they wrote down what they got so that I could show you. I'm supposed to take back a copy of yours as well. Have you looked?"

"No Bill, I'm afraid to. You'll still talk to Ron though, this week? I don't want Friday to happen without him having some advance warning if possible."

"I will Harry, Hermione went home right before I left, her parents picked her up, so she won't be seeing Luna or Neville on the Knight Bus.....they're coming right?"

"I hope so, they haven't told me they're not. Oh Bill, one more thing.....Ron and Hermione....they weren't....how can I say this...?"

"Did I catch them snogging at all? Is that what you want to know?"

The whole room started giggling as Harry had a revolted look on his face.

"That's not how I would have put it Bill, but I guess that's what I mean."

"I wasn't there last night, as my girlfriend and I went over to Peter's for dinner.....but the rest of the time I didn't see them hold hands. They argued a lot, but that's normal from what Fred and George tell me."

"Oh good.....not that I don't want them to be happy mind you, I just don't think that they would work as a couple, it would be hard on our friendship." Fred couldn't stand the suspense anymore:

"Out with mate, open up the golden envelope, let's see what you got."

Harry closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, then he opened the envelope. He couldn't find his voice, so he handed the letter to one of the twins to read. George started reading aloud:

Dear Mr. Harry James Potter,

Enclosed are your scores from the June sittings of your Ordinary Wizarding Levels. The exams were graded impartially and all judges and examiners were tested with veritaserum to ensure no bias. This step is undertaken each year to guarantee reliability in our tests. We look forward to testing you again 2 years hence in your Newly Exhausting Wizarding Tests, good luck with your academic career at Hogwarts.

The grades available are as follows:

O- Outstanding

E- Exceeds Expectations

A- Acceptable

P- Poor

T- Terrible

N/A- didn't take the exam offered

An 'O' score is worth 2 owls, an 'E' or an 'A' is worth one owl. 'P' and 'T' scores are worth zero owls. The difference between an 'E' and an 'A' may be seen in the NEWT classes you are eligible to take. The difference between 'P' and 'T' is solely for your own knowledge, to see how close you came.

In addition, the highest score of the year in each subject will receive the Governor's Award, those recipients, along with the Top Ten overall scores, will be honored at a banquet to be held at Hogwarts on the 3rd Sunday in September. If you received the highest score of the year in a particular subject, a score of 'OO' will be shown, as well as your name being on the list at the end.

Scores for Harry James Potter, Gryffindor, are as follows:

Ancient Runes: N/A

Arithmancy: N/A

Astronomy: A

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Charms: OO

Defense Against the Dark Arts: OO

Divination: A

Herbology: E

History of Magic: A

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: A

Transfiguration: E

You have received a total of 12 OWL's Mr. Potter, congratulations.  
The Top Ten students of the year are as follows:

1. Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw
2. Terry Boot, Ravenclaw
3. Hermione Granger, Gryffindor
4. Harry Potter, Gryffindor
5. Blaise Zabini, Slytherin
6. Michael Corner, Ravenclaw
7. Ernie MacMillan, Hufflepuff
8. Hannah Abbot, Hufflepuff
9. Stephen Cornfoot, Ravenclaw
10. Draco Malfoy, Slytherin.

The Governors' Awards go to the following students:

Ancient Runes: Terry Boot, Ravenclaw

Arithmancy: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

Astronomy: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

Care of Magical Creatures: Hannah Abbot, Hufflepuff

Charms: Harry Potter, Gryffindor

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Harry Potter, Gryffindor

Divination: Parvati Patil, Gryffindor

Herbology: Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor

History of Magic: Hermione Granger, Gryffindor

Muggle Studies: Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hufflepuff

Potions: Blaise Zabini, Slytherin

Transfiguration: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

We congratulate these winners, and look forward to dining with them, along with Messrs. Corner, Cornfoot, MacMillan, and Malfoy, at the banquet in September.

Griselda Marchbanks

Ministry of Magic

So no Potions, he hadn't even been close to Snape's cutoff. Harry had been waffling about being an Auror, this cinched it, he was going to have to find something else to do with his life after school. Oh well, he'd think about that later, once he looked at the career manual that Peter gave him.

"12 OWL's Harry, that's double what we got.....combined!"

Bill looked at George like that was something to brag about, getting only 3 OWL's apiece.

"Congratulations Harry, and 4th in your class to boot, that's terrific."

"How did Hermione react Bill? She didn't do as well as I thought she would. And just out of curiosity twins, I never found out what your OWLs were in."

Bill and Fred looked at each other, Fred spoke first:

"We each got an O in Charms, and an E in Potions. Snape couldn't believe it, but Flitwick was delighted. I heard he was bragging in the staff room that he was the one professor to have actually gotten through to us."

The room got a laugh out of that one, Harry looked at Bill for his Hermione answer:

"She didn't take it too well Harry, I didn't want to mention this before you opened the scores, since I knew from looking at Ron's and Hermione's letters that you had gotten the two OO's and 4th overall in the class. I will tell you there were tears and yelling, and she mentioned more than once about protesting. Ron was a bit quieter, as you're about to see."

With that, Bill took two folded pieces of paper out of his pocket and gave them to Harry. Harry opened the first one, which were Hermione's, and with a nod from Bill began reading aloud:

Ancient Runes: O

Arithmancy: O

Astronomy: E

Care of Magical Creatures: A

Charms: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

History of Magic: OO

Herbology: O

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: E

Transfiguration: O

OWL total: 16

Class Rank: 3rd

Gryffindor Rank: 1st

"Well I know she was hoping for all O's, but I hear that's practically impossible. The 'A' is a bit of a shocker, and how did she only get an 'E' in Defense?"

"Oh Harry my friend, she's wondering those same things herself. If she knows how to make a howler, I pity poor Griselda Marchbanks. To be honest I was kind of glad she left, it was getting tiring listening to her complain. Better open Ron's and get it over with."

Ancient Runes: N/A

Arithmancy: N/A

Astronomy: A

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Charms: P

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

History of Magic: P

Herbology: A

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: E

Transfiguration: A

OWL total: 6

Class Rank: 30th

Gryffindor Rank: 8th

"Yikes, that's not good at all. Is he still alive? Did your mum kill him?"

"No Harry, she didn't, she was actually pretty calm about it. Ron has been preparing her for it, or so he told me. He rationalized to her that at least he did better than the twins, even though he didn't get any O's. He would get this twitch in his eye whenever Hermione went off on a rant about 'only 16 OWL's', but he somehow managed not to punch her. I wasn't the only one ready for her to get out of there Harry, and I was only there for 30 minutes with her, imagine poor Ron having to listen to it for the full 2 hours."

Harry and the twins shuddered, and Harry quickly scribbled down his scores on 2 pieces of paper, so that Ron could see and copy, and send Pig to Hermione with the other. They heard a squeal of tires outside, and saw the Knight Bus pull up, discharging Neville and Luna. George went downstairs to let them in. He saw Dudley on his way through the living room and absently slapped him on the back as he passed by. Dudley looked a hair nervous at first, but calmed down once he didn't change into anything. Luna and Neville gave polite greetings to the Dursleys and received them in turn, they then proceeded behind George upstairs to Harry's room. They looked at the gathering of players in our little drama, and immediately noted the absence of Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. Neville walked up to Peter:

"Hello Mr. Tyson, how are you? Gran was wondering whether Harry had hired you."

"I'm fine Neville, please call me Peter. Hello Luna, pleasure to meet you again."

"And to you as well Peter. Hello Harry." She hit him with a bright smile, and the others in the room looked at each other with big grins.

"Hi Luna, hello Neville....I'm glad you two could come, have a seat."

Neville and Luna looked around and couldn't see where to sit down. Bill took that hint and waved his wand, magically expanding the room to double its size. Peter conjured up some chairs and everyone sat down, the twins sitting on the bed.

"Luna knows me Harry, because I've done some work for her father in the past. Folks, we're all here because we, in effect, are the people that Harry trusts most. Some of you have noted the absence of people like Ron and Hermione, Hagrid, Dumbledore, Molly and Arthur. Our opponent here isn't Voldemort, its Dumbledore. We're going to get Harry free, and we're going to need the counsel and help of everyone in this room. Here's the plan:

Peter proceeded to lay out the strategy, including what Harry was studying, and the events that were to take place on Friday and hopefully the following Monday (the emancipation hearing). Neville was the only one of the newcomers to speak during this presentation, asking a couple of questions about the Snape plan, otherwise they were silent and contemplative. Fred looked at Bill:

"You said this would be huge, big brother.....and you underestimated it. Peter, you've laid out quite a detailed strategy, full of pitfalls and potential consequences. What do you feel the odds are for success?"

Peter looked at Harry, he had never volunteered odds to Harry, and the lad had never asked him for any. This was the time to be honest though.

"I would say we have about a 50 percent chance of total success. By total success I mean getting Harry out of here, out of Hogwarts, and out of Great Britain.....the latter 2 of which are pretty entwined, but not completely. I think getting Harry out of here will be pretty easy, probably 90 percent. Dumbledore is a formidable adversary, and he'll use all his pull on Fudge and the Wizengamot to keep Harry at least at Hogwarts. Harry, the important thing to remember, even if this doesn't work, you can always leave next year. Once you turn 17 your life is yours to do with as you please, and you can go to school for 7th year anywhere you like."

"I know Peter, and I'm aware that this might not work. But as long as we give it our best chance, I'm prepared to deal with what happens, either way."

"If it comes to it Harry, can you handle a split decision? Leaving here but staying at Hogwarts?"

Harry hesitated for a minute, he looked at the faces around him, the people he trusted most in the world.

"Yes, if it comes to it, I can handle Hogwarts for one more year."

"Good, let's hope that we don't have to test that out. Ok, back to this coming Friday, is there any one of you who can't be here? Snape is supposed to arrive at 7 pm, according to our spy, Mr. Bill Weasley."

Everyone nodded their assent that they could be there at the appointed time.

"One more thing troops." The group smiled as Bill said that. "Bring your wands, even those of you who aren't allowed to use them.....just in case."

It was now 7:00 pm, and Peter made to leave:

"Well I must be going, I have my own set of twins," he grinned at Fred and George, "that need to be tucked in, 5 year old girls, they're going to be the death of me when they start dating, so I'm appreciating them that much more now." The room laughed and bade him goodnight. After confirming his Occlumency lesson the next day with Harry, he left.

The six of them sat around for another 2 hours talking, talking about their school experiences. Neville showed off his own OWL results, Harry and the twins had already seen his Herbology award:

Arithmancy: N/A

Ancient Runes: N/A

Astronomy: E

Charms: A

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

Herbology: OO

History of Magic: A

Muggle Studies: E

Potions: A

Transfiguration: A

OWL total: 11

Class Rank: 11th

Gryffindor Rank: 3rd

Harry and the others were very impressed with Neville's scores, only one less owl than Harry himself. It had helped that Neville hadn't failed any classes, unlike Ron. Harry wondered about Neville being 11th in their year and him 4th, with only one OWL between them, but Bill explained that they took overall scores into consideration, that was where the difference between E's and A's, and P's and T's came into play, even if the pairs were worth the same number of OWL's. Bill allowed that he had received 18 OWL's, which went a long way to making him Head Boy.

By 9:00 pm everyone was getting ready to leave, Bill to go back outside to be on guard duty, Fred and George to make sure Lee and Ginny hadn't burned the shop down, and Neville and Luna to go back home. The 'adults' (I use that term loosely in reference to the twins)

had left, and Neville told Harry and Luna that he would have a quick look at the garden out back, to give the 2 of them a chance to say goodnight. Before Harry could stop him Neville quickstepped out the door and headed outside. Harry and Luna looked at each other nervously.....nervously, Harry had never seen Luna nervous before. Even before the DOM she had looked serene. They sat down next to each other on the bed.

"Thank you for inviting me Harry, it means a lot to me to know that you trust me so much."

"You're welcome Luna, you've shown me time and time again that I can count on you. I hope you know that I'd be there for you too." Harry took a deep breath, and reached over and took Luna's hand into his own. She blushed and looked down at her feet.

"I do Harry. I know that everyone thinks I'm strange, and I guess I am in my own way. You don't care though, you got to know me before you made your decision about me. Its about the only non-impulsive thing about you," she smiled when she said that, and Harry had to acknowledge its truth.

"Harry, are you sure about Ronald and Hermione? What will they say Friday when they learn you kept them out of it?"

"They'll be hurt Luna, no doubt about that. I would hope though, that they'd be mature enough to understand that I felt that I had reason to do what I did, even if they don't agree with the reasons themselves. And we still might reach Ron, Bill and the twins are going to see about it."

"What if they aren't mature enough Harry.....I know he's your best friend, but I just don't see Ronald being mature enough to deal with this. And Hermione.....you know I don't like talking badly about anyone Harry, but she's....."

"I know Luna, and in my heart I agree with what you just said. If they don't understand?.....then a nice five year friendship will be over. I believe I've earned some slack from those two, as much as they've been there for me Luna, I've been there for them just as much. I

doubt Hermione would have any friends at Hogwarts if Ron and I hadn't taken her in, Parvati and Lavender can't stand her, neither really can Dean and Seamus, Neville doesn't mind her, but you notice he didn't stick up for her tonight. And Ron.....Ron, Ron, Ron.....he's been my best friend and he's given me a family. I hope Bill and the twins can get through to him. I would give my life to save Ron's Luna, but I won't risk it just to please him."

"I understand Harry."

They chatted about inconsequential things for a few minutes, the kind of relaxed talk that friends have.....even if they're holding hands. Neville came back in, and discreetly coughed:

"We'd better get going Luna. See you Friday Harry, I'll tell Gran you're doing just fine."

"Thank you Neville.....for everything mate."

"And you as well Harry," with that, Neville walked downstairs.

Harry and Luna got up, and he put on his shoes so he could walk her outside to the Knight Bus.

"No Harry, don't. Let's just part here, it'll be easier, and we won't have an audience. I'll owl you tomorrow ok?"

"Ok Luna, you have a safe trip home now."

"Sweet dreams Harry."

She smiled at him, and then by unspoken agreement, they leaned forward and kissed.

Author's Note: Well I did tell you no Harry/Ginny in this fic, and I'm a man of my word. Next chapter, to be posted Sunday evening 12/12, will be the big set piece you've all been drooling over, Mr. Snape. Oh, and about the OWL results.....I've read a lot of fics with Harry getting an O in Potions, and I just can't buy it, not with the level of teaching he's gotten over a 5 year span.

On another subject, you'll notice that in the arguments at the end, or in the fic in general, there isn't any swearing. This is borne of two factors: one, I want to keep this fic PG as long as possible, though PG-13 is inevitable as it goes on; and two, I swear a ton in real life, and this is my mea-culpa for my language (I don't drink or smoke, so swearing is my one bad vice....along with pizza).

Tuesday July 24, 1996

Grimmauld Place

Remus paced around the house, just waiting. Remus hadn't had much to do lately, with so many of the known Death Eaters in Azkaban, thanks to Harry and friends. That was what worried Remus, that now Voldemort would be staffed by people that they hadn't pegged. At least with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle and their ilk, they knew who they were dealing with. This quiet was very disconcerting, Remus too had noted the lack of visions that Harry was getting. Remus had to admit that if he was in Voldemort's position he would be reminding Harry about Sirius' death every chance he could, to hopefully drive the boy insane.

As it was, Remus was worried about Harry's mental health anyway. He wasn't convinced by Harry's bland assurances that things were better with the Dursleys, this was the second summer in a row that Harry was forced to go there soon after witnessing a death. Dumbledore amazed Remus sometimes, the man had spent a lifetime around children, but did not seem to understand how to handle them. Remus was not alone among the Order in wondering what Dumbledore was going to do next summer when Harry turned 17. Remus and Tonks both had dropped a few hints about it, but if Dumbledore even knew himself, he wasn't saying. Remus again thought that Voldemort too wasn't handling his end of the war well, not that he was complaining of course. If Remus had been in charge of the dark side he would have forced the final confrontation as soon as possible, before Harry got any better trained.

No, Remus didn't know the Prophecy. That said, both Dumbledore and Harry would have been horrified to know how many Order members had guessed its content, if not its exact words. All the clues

pointed to some sort of final showdown between Harry and Voldemort: the hiding of Harry at Privet Drive, the lack of information Harry was given about both current events and his past, Dumbledore keeping Snape so close. What Remus couldn't figure out is why Dumbledore had been so tolerant of the shoddy Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching over the last 5 years. There had been two good teachers Remus thought, himself (Remus was modest, but even he knew this) and the fake Moody, Barty Crouch Jr.....Death Eater though he was, Harry and his friends swore up and down that they learned loads from him, Harry now knew how to throw off the Imperious Curse, something few wizards could do quickly. On the other side of the balance sheet, there were three years when almost nothing was learned, what with Quirrel and his stuttering, Lockhart and his preening, and Umbridge.....Remus couldn't think about Umbridge without wanting to rip something apart, so he stopped that line of thought.

Dumbledore had been hinting to him that he might be getting the Defense job back this year. Once again there was a problem filling the post and Dumbledore seemed quite reluctant to give Snape the job.....if Snape truly wanted the job, Remus had heard the rumors along with everyone else, but Snape had never flat out said it in front of him. Remus wanted the job, he liked being around kids and being able to spend some time with Harry. He felt that if he'd at least gotten another year at Hogwarts that he and Harry would have a much better relationship. Maybe this year would be different, quiet. He knew this was wishful thinking.

Privet Drive

Noon

Dear Harry,

Did you see those OWL scores!!!!??!!?!!? An 'A'!!!!!! What are those examiners thinking!!! Either that or Hagrid, I knew we should have had a proper teacher all this time. I know if that Professor Grubbly-Plank had been there the entire time I wouldn't have gotten an 'A'. Honestly, teaching us about all those monsters didn't help us one bit! And Defense! I messed up on one spell, one!! It wasn't even that big

a mistake, so I mispronounced Reducto, did I deserve a grade lowering just for that!

Two Ravenclaws beat me, not one, but two!!! How can I ever show my face in the library again? I sent my protest off just now with Errol, this is going to get fixed if I have to howl the entire Ministry of Magic. At least we both did better than Malfoy, the git didn't even get the Potions award. Maybe if we had classes with Ravenclaws I would have been challenged more, I just know I'm smarter than Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. Ugggghhhh.

I hope you're doing well Harry, I'm not sure how much I believe your letter. I'll see you when Dumbledore allows you to leave your relatives, I hope you are doing what he says and not arguing with him, he knows best.

Yours,

Hermione

Harry read this letter with a resigned kind of attitude. This was so typical of Hermione, competitive to the end. It was so nice of her to congratulate him on how he did (sarcasm). That girl.....Harry gritted his teeth. Harry agreed with her about Hagrid, in principle, but notwithstanding the man's unwavering faith in Dumbledore, Harry would always have a soft spot for the half-giant who had first told him about how he was a wizard. He would never tell Hagrid that he wasn't that hot a teacher though, even if he wouldn't put it past Hermione to go spare on the guy when she got to school.

The line about not being challenged by anyone in her classes had rankled him quite a bit, after all he had beaten her in 3 of the 7 classes that they shared (Defense, Charms, and Care of Magical Creatures), though she had solid victories in the other 4, as well as O's in her other elective classes (Ancient Runes and Arithmancy). Harry knew that Hermione was very smart, but that in wizard life there was book smart, and practical smart. Harry realized that in terms of book smarts Hermione was way ahead of him, but that he was capable of narrowing that gap somewhat if he worked harder. Practical wise they were about even; Harry better in Charms and

Defense, Hermione in Transfiguration and Potions. He figured to close that gap in Transfiguration if he studied harder. He wouldn't be taking Potions, so there went his hardest class, he could devote time to his other subjects.

There were two reasons he was hesitating about Potions though: He might get his freedom after all, though ever since Peter had given him those odds he had prepared himself more and more for having to stay at Hogwarts. He realized that there were some good things at Hogwarts, like Luna.....Luna, ever since their kiss he been in a good mood, though it caused him to spend a lot of time tossing and turning, trying to get to sleep. Harry knew he should have seen it coming, she was the only one of his friends that he had wanted to write to, and he'd been anticipating her letters more and more as the summer progressed. Harry had no real clue what love was, but he certainly knew that Luna made him happier than Cho had. Harry had often speculated on why he had ever really liked Cho. Was it simply because she was beautiful and a Quidditch player? How much had he actually known about her? His other date had been with Parvati, at the Yule Ball in 4th year, and while he only faintly had liked Parvati at the time, at least he'd known more about her than her looks. With Luna there had been a chance to take his time, even if he hadn't thought about her as a 'girl' until a couple of weeks ago. The only other girl he knew as well was Hermione, and he had rejected that idea long ago.

The other reason he wasn't sure about Potions was that Snape might not be the instructor next year. If Friday's scheme worked out as they hoped he couldn't imagine Snape surviving, unless both the Ministry of Magic and the Hogwarts Board of Governors ceded total control of the school to Dumbledore. Though, how far was Dumbledore willing to go to protect Snape? Might a direct physical attack on him be what it took to separate the two? Even if Snape somehow survived, Harry wondered how many people had actually made the 'O' standard in Potions. He assumed that Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy, the star Slytherins, had. It was safe to think that at least a couple of Ravenclaws had as well. They couldn't have a NEWT class with just 4 people could they? He felt sure that Hermione was going to make it her business to find out, even if he wasn't sure he could stand another of her letters. He knew he wasn't going to bother writing back

to her, after all, what was there to write back to? Respond to one of her rants? Harry felt that he'd rather do something productive, like going outside to watch the grass grow.

That was a good idea now that he thought about it, he probably should at least get some fresh air, even if he stayed in the yard. He would do that after he read Ron's letter:

Hey Harry,

Good job on your OWLs mate, Bill showed them to all of us when he stopped by for breakfast this morning. 12 OWL's, that's as many as Percy got you know, and he made Head Boy. Mum and Dad said to send their congrats too. Mine were better than I had feared they would, but not as good as I'd hoped for, I wanted at least one 'O', but I guess it wasn't to be. No Auror training for me it looks like, but I bet they'll still let you in, even if you don't take Potions. No more Snape anyway, that's the one bright spot.

Mum thinks Dumbledore will let you out of there for your birthday, she says we'll have some kind of party at Headquarters. Oh yeah, we're moving there on Thursday, for the rest of the summer. Mum is doing more and more work with the Order, now that there's just Ginny and I at home. Work is going fine, I have more money in my pocket than I ever had before, its hard not to spend it, but I've been good. I know that Hermione has a letter here for you, she wouldn't let me read it but I can guess what it says. Oh well, I'd better floo off to work, Fred and George won't like it I'm late. See you soon Harry, don't let the muggles get you down

Ron

Harry noted the sad tone of the letter, it didn't make him feel too good either after reading it. Ron's shot about his Auror chances hadn't gone unnoticed by Harry, but he dismissed it, he would have been somewhat bitter too if he had gotten those marks. Harry couldn't think of anything that he could write to Ron that wouldn't sound like he was rubbing his marks in Ron's face. Even a 'cheer up, they weren't that bad' likely wouldn't go over too well. Ron's pride was very touchy most of the time, and it had taken quite a blow yesterday. Plus, from

what Bill had told him and from the undertone of Ron's own letter, Hermione hadn't helped anything with her whining. Harry knew that this might be the last straw (no pun intended) with Ron, especially after this weekend. The two of them did most of their studying together and his scores had been much better, Ron only beating him in Potions.

He put his likely soon-to-be former friends to the side for the moment, and headed outside. No klaxons went off when he touched the front walk, and no wizards appeared out of no-where, so he assumed he was allowed out. He went to the middle of the lawn and laid down, soaking up the fresh air and the sun.

Thursday, July 26, 1996

Privet Drive 5:00 pm

Peter walked up to Number 4 Privet Drive lost in thought. His Occlumency lessons with Harry the last two days had gone very well. It was pretty clear that the kid could learn quickly with a decent teacher. He knew that Harry still wasn't quite ready to face Snape and Dumbledore for any extended period of time, if for no other reason than Harry might well try to curse them the moment he saw them. Harry had always had good control of his emotions, outside of a few incidents, but just hearing the word 'Snape' put a look on his face that would boil cheese.

He rang the doorbell, and Petunia let him inside. On Tuesday Peter had realized that he needed a cover story in case Dumbledore or one of the minders approached her about his frequent visits. He and Petunia had kicked around ideas and came up with the plan of telling them that she was taking an exam to get her Real Estate license in a couple of weeks, and he was brother of one of Vernon's co-workers that they hired to tutor her for it. It sounded fairly odd to Peter, but he figured it would pass muster with any wizard. So far so good though, Petunia hadn't seen or heard from a wizard outside of Harry's circle since King's Cross. She and Vernon had been reasonably friendly toward him in the last week, but it was never far in the back of Peter's mind how they had treated Harry for 15 years. He agreed with the lad that they were being nice merely because the end was near. Another

factor was the fear that Harry would do something to him when he reached his majority, Harry had introduced Dobby and Winky to them on Tuesday and made it clear that they would protect him for any attacks. When he had said ‘any’ he looked straight at Vernon, causing the man to flinch noticeably.

“All right there Harry? How’s your reading coming?”

“Pretty well Peter, I’m just reading the books now to get a handle on them. Once I’ve done that, I’ll go through them again and take notes. Since I can’t practice the spells for a few more weeks, I might as well learn the theory a bit better.”

“Good plan Harry, the theory may be a bit boring, but it will help you put more power into the spell if you understand why. Remember, spell casting seems to be your strength, and you should always hone your strengths. It will help with Transfiguration too, I know you got a good grade, but that’s the other main spell casting subject and you can always improve.”

They spent the next hour doing Occlumency, Harry getting better and better at forcing Peter out of his mind. It wasn’t so much that Harry was getting quicker at it, though he was getting better at that too, but that his force-outs were much more powerful. After the last one of the session, Peter had needed a few minutes to recover, given that he was knocked back about 5 feet from the chair he was sitting in. Rubbing his elbow where he had nailed it on the edge of the desk, he congratulated Harry.

“Ok, let’s stop there, I think you have the hang of it now. I’m confident that you can resist Snape. Now, let’s go over the plan one more time:

“Snape is due here at 7:00 pm tomorrow night. At 6:00 pm our gang will assemble on the other side of the hedge, in your neighbor’s yard. This is just in case that Snape does a scan of the house before he comes in. When he arrives Winky will come out to get us through the back door and we’ll sneak into the house. We’ll let the Weasley twins lead us in that, I’m sure they have a lot of prior experience. While Winky is coming to get us, Dobby will be apparating to the DMLE to get the Aurors. That will leave you alone here with Snape for about a

minute. Whatever happens only use your wand if Snape is about to do an Unforgivable on you. You have pretty good reflexes from years of Quidditch Harry, use them if necessary. Dumbledore is likely to have Snape on some kind of leash, but I don't expect it to last. Remember Harry, just last one minute, that will give us time to get inside, and Bill, the twins, and I aren't restricted from using magic and none of us like Snape.....at all. Now once the Aurors get here just tell them what happened, sound a bit hysterical if you have to. We'll have your relatives standing by to verify that you sent the letter forbidding him from entering your home. Speaking of which, did you write it?"

Harry nodded and brought it out:

Dear Professors Dumbledore and Snape,

This is to inform you that Professor Snape is not under any circumstances welcome in our home. We would prefer no wizards at all but we know that given your callous disregard for our wishes in the past that that is unlikely. However, you will respect our wishes on this. We're not concerned with what supposed lessons that Harry must take, you have him 10 months out of the year at that school, plenty of time to teach him whatever you think is so important.

Signed,

Vernon Dursley

Petunia Dursley

Dudley Dursley

PS: I should tell you Professor Dumbledore that I agree with this, do not send that man to our home.

Harry Potter

"Nice Harry, your uncle's handwriting?"

"Yeah, I wrote out the text and we had him copy it, then we all signed it. I think he had a good time with it."

Both of them smiled, indeed Vernon Dursley had been itching to write a letter like that for 5 years. Now he was doing so with Harry's consent and active participation.

"Okiedokie Harry, lets go ahead and send it."

Harry walked over and gave the note to Hedwig, "You remember how to get to Headquarters girl? Make sure this goes right to Dumbledore, and no one else. Don't wait for a reply, just come right back here, Ok?"

Hedwig hooted twice and took off out of the window.

"Harry, its not too late to back out of this scheme. You have until Snape gets here to change your mind."

"I won't change my mind Peter, I'm in this all the way. Snape deserves payback for what he's done to me all of these years. If all of this fails and I'm back at Hogwarts he'll still find a way to make my life miserable, even if I'm not in his class. I won't back out."

"Fair enough Harry, I just wanted you to know that you have choices, you're not locked in. I can safely speak for the rest of us when I say that we're in too. Easy for me to say of course, since I have no ties to Dumbledore as the rest of you do. Whatever happens should be interesting."

Friday, July 27 1996

Grimmauld Place, 6:30 pm

The bustle around Headquarters was loud as people moved in and out of the halls. If the portrait of Mrs. Black had still been hanging there she would have been shrieking like crazy. The problem of the portrait had been solved by Bill and his tomb raiding experience, he simply took out the wall around her. As she came off the wall she started screaming with a fervor that would have made a banshee proud, it had taken an all at once Reducto by Bill, Remus, Tonks, and Hestia to put her out of their misery. Kreacher had been sent off to

Narcissa Malfoy after a massive memory wipe by Dumbledore, afterwards Kreacher knew his name and that he was to serve the House of Black, but that was about it. Snape strode through the house as if he owned it, looking for Dumbledore, sneering at those he passed by. The irritable Potions Master had returned from Halifax, Canada the day before from his conference. He ignored those who asked how it went and seemed to be in a worse mood than usual.

Remus noted that the house didn't seem quite as full as it could have been. Notably missing were Bill, Fred, George, and Charlie Weasley. Charlie had arrived that morning from Romania after an owl from Bill, ostensibly on a visit to his family, something he did a couple of times per year. He had immediately gone into a huddle with Bill, and then gone with him to work, not to return yet. Fred and George were at their shop presumably, since both Ron and Ginny were here, as well as both Molly and Arthur, and Hermione. Tonks and Kingsley were the only significant absences, they were on guard duty at Harry's house, they had volunteered for tonight, understanding that Snape would be there.

Remus followed Snape into the kitchen, where Dumbledore was talking with Molly Weasley.

"Yes Molly, Harry will be coming here for a visit tonight so he can have some quality time with his friends."

"Oh really, and how am I to get your golden boy back here Albus? Or have you taught the brat how to Apparate?"

Dumbledore answered that by taking out a portkey and giving it to Snape. "Just have him say Headquarters while he has hold of it, and it will take him here. I have another one ready for his return."

"How long am I expected to waste my time there?"

"An hour should suffice Severus, we don't want to overwhelm him the first time. Just review the basics and have him practice. The spell I gave you, Temparo Indulcli, will only disable the blood protection for one hour, then you must be gone from the house."

"Fine, just so you know I believe this is a complete waste of time, that idiot has no aptitude for this."

He made to leave and Remus called out for him to stop.

"Oh Snape, if Harry doesn't come back with you I'm immediately going to apparate over there to find out why.....and if you've had anything to do with it....." Remus trailed off, leaving the threat a bit more than merely implied.

Snape yawned, and left the room. Molly looked after him with a slightly fearful expression, she was aware of what he might do to Harry.

"Molly, Remus, everything will be fine, Harry will be here by 8:00pm and we can enjoy ourselves for a few hours. I'm sure Ron, Ginny, and Hermione are eager to see him."

Remus and Molly nodded, though he wasn't so sure about that. Ginny was eager to see Harry of course, though she had only recently been able to say a complete sentence in his presence. Ron and Hermione, Remus knew, were ready with some hard questions about what Harry had been doing, or not doing. Remus knew that Harry rarely appreciated being under the third degree, so he was grateful that no one would be able to use their wands.

Privet Drive 7:00 pm

Snape strode up to the door at Number 4 Privet Drive, and after he used Dumbledore's spell, didn't bother to ring the doorbell or knock on the door, he simply grabbed the knob and tried to turn it, only to find it had been locked. He didn't turn a hair and took out his wand:

Alohomora

The door clicked open and Snape strode inside, seeing no one in the living room he yelled out:

"Potter, get your stupid Gryffindor self in here now!"

Meanwhile Dobby had apparated to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, his instructions were to find the Auror on duty. After a polite, but hurried question, he was directed to the office of Senior Auror Travis Biller. Dobby introduced himself as Harry Potter's elf (Biller's eyes shot right up when he heard that) and gave Biller the note:

Dear Auror,

Please help me, I'm in trouble. There's a wizard in my house, Severus Snape, he's yelling at my nephew and threatening him with his wand, my husband and I are muggles and we can't help him. Please hurry.

Petunia Dursley

Biller reacted immediately, after the fiasco last summer it was standing orders that anything to do with Harry Potter be acted on immediately. Biller ran out of his office:

"Graham, Westbrook front and center, we have a Potter emergency, MOVE!!!!"

Rob Graham and Sarah Westbrook ran into the room and assembled in front of Biller and a very wide-eyed Dobby.

"Ok Dobby, are they still at the address in Surrey?"

"Yes sir Mr. Biller, the same house and everything."

Biller grabbed a cricket bat that was clearly a Port-key and the other aurors grabbed on. He looked at Dobby, who nodded and popped back to Privet Drive, right at the front door. Biller activated the Port-key and the three Aurors disappeared.

One Minute earlier:

Winky did her task and popped out to the back hedge, there she saw Harry's allies: Peter Tyson, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and George, Fred, Bill, and Charlie Weasley. She nodded fearfully, the

expression on her face was all they needed and they silently ran up to the kitchen door, which was already ajar, done by Dudley at Harry's request. Fred and George led the way, and they all assembled in the kitchen, joining a clearly frightened Dursley family as they listened to Harry and Snape yell at each other. Fred and George were next to Dudley, and motioned to him that everything would be ok. Dudley looked around at seven very tense wizards, who all had their wands drawn, and decided that if he wasn't safe now he never would be. He looked at his parents and silently communicated that message to them, they nodded and looked less afraid (no they don't have ESP or telepathy, you can do a lot with facial expressions and body language). George stared hard at Dudley for a few seconds and seemed to come to a decision, he conjured a beater bat, and offered it to Dudley. Dudley took the bat without hesitation, this was his home, he wanted to defend it.

Back to the Living Room: One minute ago

Nothing happened after Snape's yell, he repeated it:

"Potter, in here NOW!!!!!! Or I swear I'll deduct 200 points from Gryffindor the first day of classes."

This got a response out of Harry, he walked downstairs, wand in his back pocket, right where Moody said not to put it, but stealth was more important here.

"What are you doing here? I thought we told you that you weren't welcome in this house!"

"Do you honestly think that the Headmaster or I care about what you think Potter? So like your dead daddy, thinking that everyone should bow and scrape to your whims."

"Don't you dare talk about my father, he was 10 times the wizard you've ever been, Death Eater."

"Yet somehow I managed to be alive right now and he's rotting in a grave....a grave that you're not even allowed to visit."

It took every ounce of self control for Harry not to pull out his wand and yell out Avada Kedavra, he wasn't sure if it would work, his Cruciatus hadn't been very good, but it would shut Snape up at least. He concentrated on the fact that he needed Snape NOT to shut up, at least until the Aurors got here. He mentally counted the seconds, it must have been at least a minute, they should be here any second now.

"Be that as it may Snivellus, you are not welcome here, so told by the owners of this house. Leave now."

"As if I would stoop so low as to accept orders from muggle trash like your family, they must be scum if the same bloodline bore you!"

"Get Out!!!!!!"

"The Headmaster has insisted that I waste your time by teaching you Occlumency Potter, if you had learned it last term your hound might still be licking his fleas."

Snape really knew what buttons to push didn't he?

"I'll never let you teach me anything, if you call you incompetence 'teaching'"

"Sit down Potter and we will begin this."

"Are you deaf?!? Get your oily head out of here!!"

"If you do not sit down, I'll force you to Potter, it will give me great pleasure."

Harry was roaring with laughter on the inside, this pensieve memory would be perfect for DMLE use, this couldn't have gone better if he'd written Snape's script for him.

"I'll never again do anything you say, if you think I'm going to let you into my mind you're crazy."

"Very well, if you insist." He raised his wand and shouted:

## Petrificus Totalus

There was only one problem, Harry had dodged out of the way, and was standing 4 feet to the left of where he had been before. Snape looked furious, cursing that old fool Dumbledore for putting him through this torture. He decided to up the ante:

### Stupefy

Harry ducked this time and did a roll on the floor, the spell making a large black mark on the living room wall. Snape took advantage of Harry being on the ground and fired again, just missing him.

Right as Snape fired the last of his shots the door burst open, and Travis Biller, Sarah Westbrook, and Rob Graham ran into the house. Biller didn't even look at what was going on before yelling.

"Ministry of Magic, I want everyone to put their wands on the floor.....Immediately!!!"

Harry held his hands in the air in muggle fashion, Snape looked angrier than he'd ever been. He didn't lower his wand to the ground either. Biller looked around and saw Harry and Snape standing there, he easily noticed the mark on the wall.

"Did I stutter Snape? Put your wand on the ground now." He was very quiet as he said this, the message in his voice clear 'do it or I'll do it for you'. Snape took the hint and did as he was told.

"Harry, my name is Travis Biller, I'm the Senior Auror on duty tonight, we came as soon as we got your message." Snape's eyes went impossibly wide at hearing that, how had that brat sent a message?

"What happened here Harry? And where is your wand? For Merlin's sake put your hands down."

Harry turned around and lifted his shirt, showing his wand. Biller gently removed it from Harry's back pocket (we don't want any buttocks blowing off do we?). Harry put his hands to his sides and

tried to catch his breath. The 10 seconds he was dodging Snape's spells seemed like 10 minutes. He took a series of deep breaths as Snape and the three Aurors all stared at him.

"Snape came into my house, without knocking I might add since the door was locked, to supposedly give me Occlumency lessons. My family sent a note to him yesterday telling him very clearly that he was not welcome here, but he came in anyway. I repeatedly told him to leave, but he refused, and mocked the deaths of my father and godfather in the process. When I refused to sit down for his 'lessons' he started shooting spells at me, one Petrificus Totalus and two Stupefys if I remember correctly. I was busy dodging them so I might be wrong. I will say this very plainly, my wand never left my pocket. That's where you guys came in."

"Tell me plainly Harry, you used no magic?"

"No sir, I didn't. All I did was dodge him."

"Fair enough, we can check anyway. Sarah, go back to the Ministry and make sure there was no underage magic warning alarms going off for this house. I don't see any of their owls in here, but make sure anyway."

Sarah nodded and walked outside to apparate to the Ministry.

"Don't get the idea that I don't believe you Harry, we just have to make sure." He then turned to Snape, Graham's wand had never left the fuming Potions professor. Biller had always hated this man, the 35 year old former Gryffindor had been a target of Snape and his Slytherin cronies while he was at Hogwarts. Like everyone in the Auror Command he knew that Snape was a former Death Eater who had somehow regained Dumbledore's trust, and a job at Hogwarts. Biller had no children, the reason he was on duty tonight, and was glad that he would never have to send any of his progeny to a Hogwarts staffed by Snape.

"Ok Snape, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I am here by order of Headmaster Dumbledore to teach this fool Occlumency, I didn't want to, but I did as I was instructed." He looked a bit smug at that, as if saying that would solve his problems.

"And.....? That's it? Dumbledore ordered you here, so you illegally entered a locked house that you were previously told you weren't welcome in and then proceed to fire curses at a defenseless kid who didn't have his wand out?"

"I am here under Headmaster Dumbledore's orders. The brat wouldn't sit down for his lesson so I attempted to force him to."

Harry just stood there fascinated at this exchange, was this really Snape's defense? Be arrogant and dismissive and count on the old man to rescue him? Sarah Westbrook entered the open door, she walked up to the group:

"Travis, no instances of underage magic have been reported for this house. The last magic performed here before tonight happened yesterday, by an adult wizard."

"Thank you Sarah. Well Harry...." Biller took a minute to think...."Where are your relatives? Can they confirm this letter you sent?"

"Yes sir they can. Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon!! Could you come out here please?!"

In the kitchen Peter motioned Petunia and Vernon to go to the living room, they were needed to put the final nail into the coffin of Severus Snape. They had listened the sound of spells hitting the floor and walls, but no cries from Harry and no words of triumph from Snape, so they knew Harry was getting out of the way. Fred and George had quickly handed out Extendable Ears, even the Dursleys used them once they were shown how. They heard Biller and his group come in the door and the discussion that followed.

Petunia and Vernon walked into the living room and immediately noticed the black marks on the wall and floor. They looked at Harry, who was none the worse for wear, having caught his breath.

"Hello, I'm Vernon Dursley, this is my wife Petunia, Harry's Aunt." They shook hands all around (not Snape of course) and Biller introduced himself and his crew.

"Mr. Dursley where were you when this was going on?"

"Umm.....well we were hiding Mr. Biller, we knew that that man was coming and we wanted to stay out of the way.....we're not wizards you know, we wouldn't know how to defend ourselves from him. Harry hasn't painted that nice a picture of the man.....as you can see."

"Harry said that you all sent a letter to Snape, telling him not to come here. Is this true?"

"Yes sir it is, though I think that the letter was addressed to Dumbledore as well as this man. We all signed it, even Dudley and Harry. We didn't want him here and we still don't."

"Was the door locked Mr. Dursley?"

"Yes Mr. Biller it was, we always lock our doors at night."

"Mrs. Dursley, is there anything you would like to add?"

"No sir, its how my husband and nephew said.....we were listening at the door after you came in, and we know what he told you."

Biller looked around at the people in the room, it was obvious as to what had happened, he just wanted a minute to consider how to do his next actions. This was going to be huge, the arrest of a Hogwarts professor for attacking Harry Potter. Unbeknownst to him and the others, Winky was hidden behind a window outside taking pictures with Peter's camera, as she had since Snape had started firing spells.

"Well it's clear that the law was broken here.....Mr. and Mrs. Dursley are you pressing a complaint against Snape here?"

"Yes sir we are, we want him prosecuted to the fullest extent of your law," Vernon answered.

"Harry, what about you? Are you making a complaint at him for attacking you? You're willing to testify against him at the Wizengamot?"

"Yes Mr. Biller I am, I want him in Azkaban for what he did. I'm not even safe in my own home."

That was all Biller needed to hear, he turned to a still sneering Snape:

"Severus Snape you are under arrest for unlawful entry into a muggle residence and assault on a person not allowed or able to use magic. If convicted of both these charges you may receive 10 years in prison. Anything you'd like to say?"

"Dumbledore will have me out of your control before the night is over, this is not the last of this."

"Not on my watch Snape. Mr. Potter, do you need any of us to stay here with you? Do you feel safe enough now that he's being taken away?" He handed Harry back his wand, which stayed in Harry's hand.

"No sir Mr. Biller, thank you, we'll be fine. Won't we?" He looked at his aunt and uncle, and they nodded, knowing the army that was in the kitchen.

"Very well Harry, we'll see you at his trial. I don't need to tell you what we'll do to you if you try to escape do I Snape?" Seeing Snape shake his head, he motioned to Westbrook, who took out a small wizard camera and took photos of the marks on the floor and walls. They then walked outside, 3 wands trained on Snape.

Harry, Petunia, and Vernon looked at each other and smiled, though in a tired way. Harry in particular felt like he had been through the ringer, even though the incident had not last 10 minutes from Alohomora to the arrest.

Outside the Dursley home, Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt watched three of their colleagues leave the house with their wands all pointed at Snape. They had heard the arguing between Harry and Snape reasonably clearly, but hadn't heard the spells or seen the light flashing. The next thing they knew, Biller and his crew were storming the house, seemingly on their own initiative. Tonks had gotten up to interfere, but Shacklebolt had stopped her, reminding her that the two of them were not supposed to be there. Biller was one of the top Aurors in the Ministry, and was known for the efficiency of his investigations and arrests. They watched a few minutes later as Biller took out a port-key and all four of them grabbed on to it, and disappeared.

"Ok Tonks, get back to Headquarters and tell Dumbledore what happened, get him over here."

Tonks nodded and apparated away. Kingsley leaned against the light pole and speculated what might have gone on inside the house. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Snape had attacked Harry and the Aurors came running. Who got them though? An owl wouldn't have been that fast, and Kingsley didn't know about Harry's hired help. He quickly decided to do nothing until Dumbledore got there.

Inside the house Peter entered the living room and took stock of the situation. He saw the curse marks and looked at the un-injured Harry. Vernon and Petunia were as calm as they could be, considering.

"Good job you three, you were very calm and polite. That works with Biller, you heard how he reacted to Snape. By the way, I filed the petition today, I went down there myself so that there would be no mistakes. Now all we have to do is wait for our beloved Dumbledore, let's have a seat shall we."

Because they knew that Snape was only part one, once the minders saw Snape being arrested they would send for Dumbledore, there was another reckoning due to happen tonight. Snape was just a fun appetizer.

Tonks burst into the front parlor of Grimmauld Place and screamed:

“Dumbledore!!!!!!!!!!”

The entire house came streaming into the parlor, Molly in the lead, she grabbed Tonks:

“What happened, is Harry ok, what did that man do to him?!?!?!?”

Dumbledore came up to Tonks and much more calmly asked her what happened.

“Snape was arrested Professor, I saw three Aurors leading him out of the house and they port-keyed out of there. There was some kind of argument between Harry and Snape sir, then before Kingsley and I knew it, the Aurors were breaking down the door and inside the house.”

“Which Aurors Tonks? Any of our people?”

“No sir, it was Travis Biller, Sarah Westbrook, and Rob Graham. They’re not pro-Dark or anything, but they’re not part of the program.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes, Biller was a good Auror, but had resisted recruitment to the Order. Without opening his eyes he spoke:

“Don’t say it Remus, yes you told us so. Let’s just get over there and fix this. Its obvious Harry panicked somehow and Severus took something he said the wrong way. Kids (he looked at Ginny, Ron, and Hermione), you come too, maybe you can talk to Harry better than we can.” He summoned 2 brooms (ones for sweeping) from the closet and made them into port-keys. The 13 of them (Dumbledore, Remus, Hermione, 4 Weasleys, Hestia, Tonks, Diggle, Moody, Dawlish, and McGonagall) grabbed on to the brooms and vanished at a command from Dumbledore.

They appeared outside Privet Drive, and Kingsley threw off his invisibility cloak to go meet them.

“Nothing has happened since Tonks went to get you, I think. No one has left or entered the house anyway.”

"Come with us Kingsley, let us see what has happened here." Dumbledore looked very tired at that moment Remus thought. He was privately ecstatic at the mess Snape had caused, and getting himself arrested to boot. Dumbledore would have a hard time covering this up, whatever it was.

They filed up to the door and Dumbledore entered the unlocked door, he found Harry, Peter, Vernon, and Petunia in the living room looking not the least bit surprised at his arrival. The Order members and youngsters stood fidgeting in the foyer as Dumbledore looked around, noting the obvious curse marks and the fact that Harry still had his wand after meeting with Biller and his people.

"Hello Harry. Petunia, so good to see you again. Mr. Dursley. Peter, seeing you here makes this a little clearer."

They all nodded at Dumbledore, but didn't say anything. The silence hung thick as 17 people (not counting the 7 in the kitchen) were quiet for a moment. The visitors slowly came into the living room and saw the curse marks as well. Finally Dumbledore couldn't take the silence anymore:

"So what has happened here Harry? Why was it necessary to have Professor Snape arrested?"

Harry glared at Dumbledore, but said in a quiet tone of voice, "I told you he wasn't welcome here Professor. We (he motioned at his aunt and uncle) even wrote it down for you so there would be no doubt of our wishes. Snape knew about the note, so I know you got it."

"Professor Snape Harry. Yes, we did get your note. However your need to learn Occlumency is more important than your dislike for Professor Snape or your relatives disdain for our kind."

"I'll call him professor when he earns his title. I repeat, I don't want him here, they don't want him here. Period. I told him to leave and he attacked me. Surely even you can't overlook the curse marks you see. Let's note that I still have my wand, so at least one person in that argument had some self-control. I'm pressing full charges against

your boy, Professor Dumbledore, this time next week he'll be rotting in Azkaban."

Dumbledore sighed. He knew it would be difficult to talk Harry out of this, but he was confident that he could, they simply couldn't afford to lose Severus. He was very much wanting to know what Peter was doing there, but he had a sinking feeling that he already knew. The rest of the room was dead silent as they watched the two beacons of the light go at each other.

"Well it's clear Harry that we left you alone too long here, go upstairs and get your things and we'll go to Headquarters."

"No."

Dumbledore had already half-turned, to find some more port-key objects. He knew he couldn't have heard that correctly.

"I'm sorry Harry, you must have misunderstood, you need to go get your things, you're leaving here for the summer."

"My command of the English language is as comprehensive as anyone else's in this room Professor. I told you 'no', because I'm not leaving, at least not with you, and not to Headquarters. The only time I'll ever set foot in that mausoleum again is if I get ownership of it in Sirius' will and I need to sell it."

Harry's voice had never raised from his initial soft tones, but the hard look on his face spoke volumes.

"I'm afraid that it wasn't a request Harry, you must do as I say in this matter."

"Sorry, but no I will not. Would you like a repeat of the last incident of someone who has no summer authority over me telling me to do something I don't wish to do? Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, do I have to leave now?"

Petunia and Vernon steeled themselves and looked at Harry with a respect that they'd never had before, Vernon spoke up:

"No Harry, you may stay until you would like to leave."

"There you have it, lovely to see you again Professor, good night."

"Harry, I'm sorry to say this, but there are many more of us than you, and only Mr. Tyson here can use his wand."

"That's not quite accurate Professor." Bill Weasley led his contingent out of the kitchen, including Dudley who brought up the rear.

Harry, Peter, Petunia, and Vernon stood up and moved to the side of the room that his allies were on. Fred spoke up:

"Harry isn't quite as defenseless as you seem to think. If he doesn't want to leave then he doesn't have to.....we'll make sure of that."

Remus nearly had a heart attack right there in the living room, he wasn't the only one. Clearly Harry had been up to more than grieving over his dead godfather.

Dumbledore was having a hard time fathoming this, but his attitude was always to act as if you have authority and power, even if you don't.

"This changes nothing Harry, I'm sorry but you must come with us." He raised his wand arm slightly, but before it got up an inch he had 8 wands, one beater bat, and 2 angry looking House Elves taking aim at him.

"Don't even think about it Professor Dumbledore, we're not kidding here. I will not go quietly."

Dumbledore looked around and saw that his group had their wands out as well and were pointing them at Harry, prepared to defend Dumbledore. It was a classic Mexican standoff, the only one without a wand in the air was himself.

Hermione couldn't hold herself back anymore and starting screaming at Harry:

"Harry James Potter what do you think you're doing!!!! Put that wand down this instant!"

Harry just stared at her, his wand still trained on Dumbledore, she quailed a bit under his gaze, but didn't lower her wand.

Molly tried next, looking right at her 4 sons:

"WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!!!! PUT YOUR WANDS DOWN THIS INSTANT."

No Weasley wand was lowered, Charlie found his voice first:

"I'm sorry Mum, but no. We're choosing to do what is right, rather than what is easy."

Molly started crying, as Arthur looked thunderstruck. George looked at his mother:

"We've chosen our side Mum, Harry leaves here over our dead bodies." All of the others nodded their agreement. Harry looked at Ron and saw the indecision on his face:

"All of you over there who feel you're on the wrong side of the room, we would welcome you to our cause. If you feel you're being unfairly caught up in this, this is your time to declare." He looked at Ron, pleading with his eyes.

Ron looked his weeping mother, his quiet father.....and his beyond angry would-be girlfriend. He lowered his wand and walked across the room.

"Are you sure about this Harry? This is heavy mate."

"I'm sure Ron, I don't ever want to raise my wand to you again." Ron nodded, and embraced Harry. He then turned toward his parents and raised his wand, just like the others.

"Anyone else? We don't want a fight here, God knows.....but we won't shy away from one either."

Ginny saw her brothers on the other side, the brothers who had loved her, looked out for her, protected her. She saw only them, not Harry, as she walked over to Bill's side and raised her wand at the other side. Bill looked at his parents:

"Mum, Dad, don't do this, don't make us do this, please."

Arthur Weasley had his arm around his wife, listening to her sobs as 6 of their children stood ready to defend Harry Potter to the death. What a kid this must be, to command this kind of loyalty. Where had he gone wrong? Had he raised them wrong? Was Dumbledore that beyond the pale to Harry? He and Remus made eye contact, there was nothing else to do now but act.

They both walked to the other side and stood next to Harry.

The rest of the Order couldn't move, more than one person thanked whatever deity they prayed to that Harry had dealt with Snape, otherwise curses would have been flying. Dumbledore sighed:

"Very well Harry, you seem to have given me little choice."

End Chapter.

Author's Note: There you have it, far and away the longest chapter I've written. And now, my dear readers, I've reached a crossroads. I no longer know what to do about this story. Next chapter there will be a hearing and a trial, but I have no idea what I want to do with the hearing. I started this fic with the idea that I wanted Harry to travel abroad and get out of Hogwarts. I seized on the mistakes made by Dumbledore and decided that Harry needed some new scenery, since there have been so many 'normal' 6th year stories. But that said, I've grown attached to the supporting players in this story and I don't want to lose them. I'm not talking about Peter, his time is almost up as a main supporting player to the story, but the others, some of the fascinating possibilities that JK Rowling has given us. So I find myself in the middle of a dilemma.

The way I see it I have three options: 1. Do the story as planned and move him off to North America as planned (though it would be very tempting to take Luna and Neville along with him). 2. Reverse field from my original intentions and keep Harry in Britain. 3. Do both ,and do two separate stories and have my cake and eat it too. I would create a new story and simply use the first 10 chapters from this one. This would mean less frequent updates to each story, but I update a lot anyway, so it won't be that bad.

I would like to hear what you think about this, as well as what you think of Chapter 10, I worked very hard on it and I hope you like it. Thanks for reading, take care folks.

“Very well Harry, you seem to have given me little choice.”

With that statement, given in a resigned kind of way, Dumbledore put his wand slowly in the left pocket of his robe. The tension in the room was quickly released, as no one had wanted a war in the middle of a very crowded Dursley living room. He turned to the Order members on his side and motioned for them to lower their wands, as it was clear that Harry’s people weren’t about to do so first.

“Harry it would seem as though we need to have a talk. I’m aware that we’ve had some issues between us lately, but I never thought it would come to this.”

“Well I’m not relishing this either Professor Dumbledore, but it’s high time I started making some decisions for myself. I’m not comfortable with many of the choices you’ve made on my behalf, tonight was simply a culmination of some of those choices.”

“Why did you have Professor Snape arrested Harry?”

Harry motioned at the curse marks that were still fresh, as if the answer was obvious.

“You really need to ask that? Or did you allow for the fact that Snape would attack me?”

“How did the Aurors get here Harry?”

“I sent Dobby to go get them, I knew what was going to happen here.”

“You set him up? Do you realize the damage you have caused us Harry? Professor Snape is an extremely valuable member of the Order, he is our eyes and ears into Voldemort and his people. You must not press charges, we need to go there tonight to clear this up.”

“I will acknowledge that I assumed things would happen as they did, and I acted accordingly. That does not change the fact that your pet professor tried to use his wand to harm me while I was able only to dodge him. I want you to look me in the eye right now, in front of all of these people and tell me that you condone what he did.”

“What did you do to provoke him Harry?”

“I told him to leave, and yes I took a few shots at him when he brought up my dead father and my recently dead godfather.....but he struck first, both verbally and physically.....oh yeah that’s right, I didn’t strike physically!!! Don’t worry Professor Dumbledore, I’m sure you’ll see my recollection via pensieve at Snape’s trial. And you never answered my question.”

“Of course I don’t condone physical violence Harry.”

“There you go, though I know you’re about to turn hypocrite and do everything you can to get Snape out of trouble.”

“We need him Harry, I only hope I can convince him to keep helping us.”

“That’s your problem, not mine. I intend to bring every pressure possible to bear on the Ministry to throw that jerk in Azakaban for.....what was it Biller said? Oh yeah, 10 years. I’m sure the war will be over by then.”

Just then Harry felt a tickling sensation in his head, Dumbledore was doing some snooping it seemed. Harry brought his defenses up and opened the door in his mind to his best weapon: the time Voldemort used Cruciatus on him. He pushed that memory forward right into the probe he was feeling, hard.

Dumbledore immediately fell to the floor, but somehow pulled his mind out of Harry’s after about 10 seconds. The wands were all up again as Dumbledore lay panting on the ground and Harry just stood there, smiling.

“Folks, for those of you who don’t know what just happened, your beloved Headmaster tried to use Legilmeny to read my mind. As many of those in my circle know, I have made great strides with my Occlumency and I forced him out. Perhaps I could have been a bit gentler, perhaps not. How did you like my memory of being Crucio-ed Professor?”

All of the air in the room was sucked up after Harry said that. Dumbledore further proceeded to flatten them all by smiling slightly.

"Well Harry, its been many years since I've been hit with that spell, even if yours was just a memory of it, very powerful indeed. You could have told me that you'd been studying your Occlumency harder you know."

"And you really would have believed me. You would have thought I was just attempting to get rid of Snape.....not an unrealistic assumption, but you still would have sent that git here and the same thing would have happened. Plus, you know him, I could have done to him what I just did to you and he wouldn't have believed it, he would have concocted some excuse. Put your wands down people, the demonstration is over. Professor Dumbledore knows not to go poking into my mind without permission now, don't you Professor?"

"Has Voldemort tested this new found ability out Harry?"

"Nope, I've only just learned it this week. Meet my solicitor and Occlumency teacher, Peter Tyson. He taught me quite differently than your boy did, you've experienced the results. Perhaps if you'd tried a bit harder to get a decent teacher for me, Sirius would still be alive."

"We all make mistakes Harry, even you."

Harry burst out laughing, "Name the last time you acknowledged you made a mistake in regards to me."

"I did Harry, in my office when I told you the Prophecy. I'm not proud of some of the things I've done on your behalf, but they were to protect you. I don't think they warranted drawing your wand on me and attempting to split the Order."

"That's your opinion. I don't believe I did anything wrong tonight Professor, I kept my temper in check and my mind clear. As for splitting the Order.....Remus and Mr. Weasley are grown men more than double my age, they knew what they were doing. Ron and

Ginny? They're my brother and sister Professor, I'd have done the same for them in a heartbeat."

Dumbledore sighed, this conversation was getting away from him too easily. Harry had obviously planned for this and had something of a script that he was working off of, Dumbledore was flying a bit blind and wasn't sure how to get back control of the events.

"I think we should talk privately Harry, just you and I, and see if we can work this out between us."

"I agree that we need to have a chat Professor, but not here, not now, and certainly not alone, not until some things are settled first. Plus I think we should take a night to let what happened sink in, and not say things purely from emotion."

"Very well Harry, come to Headquarters tomorrow and we can talk, bring Peter if you want to."

"Nope Professor, you're not listening again. I told you I don't want to go back there, I really don't like that place, and neither did Sirius. Tomorrow is a good idea though, if you like we'll meet at the Leaky Cauldron, I'm sure Tom has a room large enough for us to bring some people and have some privacy. Say.....2pm."

"That would be fine Harry, again, I don't seem to have much choice."

"I'm sorry Professor, but you've brought this down upon yourself with your decisions. Like I said, I'm not happy about tonight either. I would request that you bring Professor McGonagall to the meeting, if you would care to come ma'am."

"Certainly Harry, if you wish. I'm interested to hear first-hand what is going on."

"Thank you Professor, I have always valued your opinion and would like to hear it tomorrow. Any other Order member who would like to come is welcome as well, I have no secrets to hide from you. However, should you somehow spring Professor Snape from jail, leave him home. Its not a violation of the Underage Magic Restriction

for me to punch him, and something tells me he won't show much restraint towards me either."

Dumbledore nodded, he knew Harry's words were accurate.  
"Anything else you'd like to say now Harry?"

"Yes actually: Tonks, would you and Remus be available in the morning? We need to have the will read. How does 11 am sound?"

Tonks and Remus both nodded their assent. Tonks was still reeling from what happened and a bit ashamed that she hadn't joined Harry. She revered Dumbledore, but thought that the kid made a lot of sense in what he was saying.

Remus was still attempting to process what he'd seen tonight, the whole world had just tipped over. He knew he had made the right call though. Harry walked up to Dumbledore and offered his hand:

"Until tomorrow Professor, I hope something like tonight never has to happen again."

"So do I Harry, so do I." He took Harry's hand and shook it, then turned to leave. The Order looked at him like they'd never seen him beaten before, and it shocked them. He reprogrammed his port-keys and motioned for his people to grab on to them. Before they all did, Hermione approached Harry and smacked him across the face.

Harry made no move to dodge the blow, even smiling once it was over.

"Did that make you feel better Hermione? Was it good to get that off your chest?"

"What are you doing Harry? Why would you speak to Dumbledore that way? I hate Snape too, but Dumbledore trusts him, you can't be seriously expecting to send him to Azkaban."

"Oh but I am Hermione, I am. Come tomorrow to the meeting and you'll understand better. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to talk with my friends for awhile."

Hermione wasn't so mad that she didn't fail to note that she apparently wasn't included in the 'friends' statement. She looked for a brief second like she was about to cry, but before she did, she turned to walk away.

"Oh yeah Hermione, that smack you gave me? That one was free, for old times sake.....the next one you'll have to pay for, understand?"

Hermione walked away without acknowledging what Harry said, but she flinched visibly, so Harry knew his point had gotten across. She joined the adult Order members and they port-keyed away.....except for Molly Weasley, who had gathered herself and decided to stay.

(Just to remind you, remaining at Privet Drive in the aftermath are Harry, 3 Dursleys, 8 Weasleys, Peter, Neville, Luna, Remus, and Dobby and Winky)

Ron and Ginny turned to Harry, they were wondering how long this had been in preparation. Harry further confused the situation for them by going over to Luna and taking her hand in his, when had this happened? Ron couldn't take it anymore:

"How long have you been planning this Harry? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've been thinking about this since school finished Ron.....but before we get into any of that, can one or more adult wizards in the room put multiple silencing charms on the house.....better yet, do that and scan the property to make sure that Dumbledore didn't leave anyone behind on "accident"."

Fred and George walked outside to do their scan, while Bill and Charlie put the silencing charms all over the house. George reported back:

"All quiet Harry, even the guards that must have been here are gone now."

"Great George, and thanks guys. Thank you for standing by me tonight, all of you." With those last words he looked at the Dursleys, who nodded. Vernon spoke up:

"If you don't mind folks we'll be stepping out for awhile, this really isn't our business anymore. We'll be back in a few hours. Goodnight."

Dudley looked like he wanted to stay, but dutifully left with his parents out the front door. Harry sat down and sighed, never letting go of Luna's hand.

"Peter, I hate to ask this of you....."

"I know Harry, I'd better get down to the DMLE to make sure our friend Snape doesn't get sprung. I know some people down there and there's pressure I can bring. I have your leave to speak for you?"

"Of course Peter, do what you have to do to keep him in there, Dumbledore should be there any minute. You know that I can't stay here tonight if he gets out, Snape will be back here alone.....or with allies, its too much to risk."

"Yes it is Harry, send Dobby or Winky to my home with your whereabouts, if I'm not home my wife will take the message. I'll see you at 11am at Gringotts Harry. Goodnight folks." With that Peter walked outside, checked for watching neighbors, and apparated away.

"In answer to your questions Ron, I hired Peter a week ago today for the purpose of gaining some more control over my own affairs, and potentially leaving Hogwarts. We've been planning tonight ever since, what Dumbledore doesn't know, perhaps because I 'forgot' to tell him, is that Peter filed the petition for my emancipation this afternoon. It should be decided next week."

"Harry, you're too young to be on your own. What are you thinking?" Only Molly could have missed the point this badly, though it was out of concern for him.

"Mrs. Weasley, do you really believe that? That I'm not mature enough to make my decisions?"

"You're just so young Harry, you know so little of our world."

"And whose fault is that? Certainly not mine. Only a blind fool would consider this house to be good for me. I know that Voldemort, a name by the way that you can't listen to without flinching, and his boys can't attack me here supposedly.....but I'm not willing to put that to the test, even if I liked the Dursleys. The only reason we've been getting along the 3 weeks is due to threats and my desire to leave. I agree that 3 weeks ago I didn't know much about our world, but that's changing.....I'm changing Mrs. Weasley, for the better."

"Ron, the reason I didn't tell you about this is simple, and if I was wrong I hope you'll forgive me: I couldn't trust that you wouldn't tell Hermione. I knew that if I asked you not to tell Dumbledore that you wouldn't, but you'd tell her, and you saw her reaction tonight. Ginny, it was the same thing, I couldn't risk Dumbledore finding what I was doing before tonight.....not that he knows fully what I'm planning."

"Were you really that certain about Hermione?"

"No I wasn't, but I wasn't willing to take the chance.....and tonight proved me right. I've been doing a lot more thinking and planning lately guys, and I'm more and more pleased with the results. Remember, the top 2, and 4 of the top 10 students in our year are Ravenclaws, the thinkers. I might even give you a run for your money in chess soon Ron, with a bit more practice."

"Not bloody likely. So I couldn't help but notice the hand in yours Harry....."

"Oh yeah.....that's a new development too, but a very welcome one." Harry smiled at Luna and squeezed her hand. She kissed him on the cheek and sat down next to him. She had not said a word since the first Snape spell had been fired.

The whole room smiled, Mrs. Weasley for the first time since her arrival at Privet Drive. They all sat down and Harry looked them over, his trusted friends.

"Remus, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I'm sorry that you had to see all this, and that you were forced to choose sides like that. If there was any other way to get this done I would do it, but if your sons hadn't intervened on my behalf Dumbledore would have kidnapped me.....now I know that's not what he would call it, and of course it would 'be for my own good', but that's what it would be, kidnapping. Charlie, did Bill tell you everything that was going on, and why?"

"Yes he did Harry, this morning, I hope that was ok."

"After what you did tonight you need never ask that question Charlie, there's nothing I won't trust you guys with now. I have never been more proud in my life than when your wands went up. Now there's just one thing more to tell you, most of you I've told, but for those of you who don't know what the Prophecy says, here it is:

(Do we really need yet another re-telling of the darn thing? I didn't think so, we all know what it says.)

The newcomers to the group were dead quiet, taking it in. Remus didn't feel better after having his intuition confirmed, but was aghast nonetheless that Harry was taking it so calmly, telling it in such a flat, matter of fact way.

Molly of course started crying again, this was not an easy night for her. She had only stayed because of Arthur and the children, she wasn't too comfortable with an adult Harry, particularly one that was so take charge. She missed the quiet little boy who was her youngest son's best friend. Molly had as many issues, privately, with Dumbledore as anyone, but she couldn't get past the idea that there really was no one else to lead the Light side. Fudge was useless, Amelia Bones was an unknown factor due to her need to be impartial while leading the DMLE, Amos Diggory was perhaps a bit too emotionally involved after the murder of his son, and Manuel Zabini had produced 3 Slytherin children, even if he himself was a Ravenclaw. Now Harry seemed bent on challenging the Headmaster, even if only to gain a bit of freedom. Hearing that he was the final weapon was just too awful to contemplate. Arthur looked a bit dazed as he spoke:

"Are you sure that's it Harry? No other earth-shattering moments to hit us with?"

Harry laughed, "Do you really want me to answer that question Mr. Weasley? Just kidding, no there isn't. I want to make plain though that the circle ends with us here, no one else is to be let in until the time comes. I would have liked for Tonks to stay too, but she chose to leave with Dumbledore. The rest of them are all his people, and will report to him. Yes Ron and Ginny, that means Hermione too. I'm not saying that she's the enemy, but she's not one of us. Can you go along with that?" Ron grimaced, but Ginny spoke first:

"I'm not aware that we have a choice, but I happen to agree with you. I think we could all do with a bit less nagging in the coming school year." Ron spoke up:

"Speaking of which Harry, are you really intent on leaving Hogwarts? Could you really leave us after what just happened? After Luna there?"

"I want the option available to me Ron, at the very least I need it to threaten Dumbledore with. You saw what happened in here tonight, I got the jump on him and he backed down. I will easily acknowledge that I'm not as smart, experienced, or wise as our beloved Headmaster.....yet. I am the final weapon though, and my views need to start being listened to. That entire DOM fiasco can be squarely laid at the door of Dumbledore and his need to supposedly protect me.....though he's done a darn poor job of it so far. But to answer your question Ron.....I can't say that I want to leave anymore, you're right, I can't leave you guys after what you did for me tonight. I cannot stress enough to all of you that Dumbledore cannot know about this, when he finds out about my petition I intend to go right for his throat while using it.....figuratively of course. All of that said, when this war is over, or when I graduate Hogwarts, whichever comes later, I'm out of here. I have some money in that vault and I'm liable to get much more tomorrow, I want to see some of the world, maybe live as a muggle for a time, who knows. We'll have this conversation again in about 18 months and see where it stands."

Smiles lit up the room when Harry said he wanted to stay in Britain. The only one who had been sure of it beforehand had been Luna.....though why she was sure was a question. One never knew with Luna really.

Fred thought to ask something:

"So where are you going to stay tonight Harry? You know we have an extra room at the shop you can use.....you are a partner there of course, so we'll make sure its not booby-trapped. Considering the room you're living in now it's a veritable palace." Harry grinned at that, giving the twins his Tri-Wizard money had been one of his better ideas.

"Excellent idea Fred, I knew there was a reason I went into business with you two, let me go get packed."

Ron and Luna joined him in the walk upstairs, as the others sat talking quietly. Molly and Arthur weren't eager to go back to Headquarters this night, Dumbledore wasn't likely to be happy with them. Ginny decided to take up Bill's offer of a place to stay, it would be a crowded flat with the two of them and Charlie, but it would be a quiet place to avoid the possible storm at Headquarters.

The three teenagers came downstairs after a couple of minutes, most of Harry's things were already in his trunk (no homework before 6th year remember) and they had not lingered to talk. Ron was still digesting a Harry/Luna relationship, and Harry and Luna were perceptive enough to realize that, and gave him some time to assimilate it. Ron was going to go with Harry to the WWW shop, he felt that his parents and Remus would need no distractions while talking to Dumbledore.

Everyone said their goodbyes and promised to meet at the Leaky Cauldron the next day before the talk with Dumbledore. Ron and Luna were going to accompany Harry and Remus to the will reading, they knew Harry would need emotional support there. The adults apparated away, while the kids stuck out their wands for a soon to busy Stan Shunpike and the Knight Bus.

(Its quite tempting to do a Knight Bus scene here, but I could never do the incredible Lee Ingleby justice)

Saturday July 28, 1996

Gringotts Bank, London

10:50 am

Ron, Harry, and Luna were the first to arrive at the bank, Luna had flooed to the shop from Ottery St. Catchpole in time for breakfast as the teens continued the process of getting used to one another again. Ron was still a tad shaken by the new order of things, and Harry and Luna were pretty unaccustomed to spending time together outside a big group. There was no arguing though, and Ron and Harry both privately and independently felt that it was a welcome change, they weren't going to go gray as early as they had thought.

Peter walked through the doors a few minutes after they did, and made a beeline for them. Harry tried to get a hint of what had happened by the look on Peter's face, but he was inscrutable. Harry had been on pins and needles at the shop all the previous evening, waiting for an owl from Peter saying that the worst had happened, but no messages came.

"Hello all, how'd the aftermath go?"

"It was good Peter, and I'm hoping that you have good news that will add to it."

"Oh I do Harry. Somehow I got to the DMLE before Dumbledore did and managed to have about 2 minutes alone with Biller to prepare him for what was going to happen. The guy likes you Harry, be very glad for that, it went a long way to keeping our favorite Potions professor a guest of the Ministry."

"Why would he like me? Because of the Boy Who Lived stuff?"

"Well that too, remember Harry, Biller was a Gryffindor too, in the same house as your mother and father for his first 5 years. No, the

main reason he likes you is because of how you handled yourself last night. You showed a lot of self-restraint toward Snape last night Harry, you didn't so much as draw your wand did you? (Harry nodded) 99 out of 100 other people your age would have started blasting as soon as Snape threw the first curse.....then the case would have been a bit more cloudy. You didn't though, and that all but assures that a trial will go forward. Oh Dumbledore tried Harry, he promised to vouch for Snape, deliver him dead or alive for a trial that he was certain he could talk you out of. Yes, he actually said that to Biller, that was likely to talk you out of pressing charges at a meeting you 2 are to have later today. Our friend Travis wouldn't have any of it, he said that he's not sure he would release Snape even if YOU wanted him to. Biller said he regards crimes against children as beyond the pale, and it would be an insult to let it go merely on Dumbledore's word, however much affection he had for the man. Dumbledore said he would speak with Amelia Bones today and sort this out, Biller told him to speak away, Snape was going to be spending the night in a holding cell."

"My dreams have come true Harry, Snape in jail." Ron was grinning from ear to ear as everyone laughed. This was even better than Draco Malfoy, the bouncing ferret. They saw Remus and Tonks enter the building together, and walked over to meet them. Harry looked at Remus, who seemed quite tired.

"How'd it go at Headquarters guys?"

"It didn't Harry, Dumbledore never came back last night. He sent an owl saying that he couldn't get Snape freed, but that was it. I think he must have gone back to Hogwarts. I'm sure he'll be ready for you this afternoon."

"No doubt. Let's get this over with shall we, I'm sure I won't enjoy any of it."

With that they approached the main Gringotts counter, where they stated their business. The teller pressed a buzzer and a very old looking goblin approached them from a side door.

"Hello Mr. Potter, Mr. Lupin, Ms. Tonks....and friends it seems. I'm Fortrap, a senior manager here, I handle all of young Mr. Potter's business at Gringotts. Shall we go into my office and do our business?"

They followed him through the side door and into a large corner office with a nice view of Diagon Alley, clearly Fortrap was quite high in the hierarchy.

"Mr. Potter I was Bill Weasley's mentor during his first years with Gringotts. I took over your account two years ago at his personal request, he's a fine young man. I've made it my business to keep an eye on things for you and this will reading is merely an extension of that. Now onto the will: I need Harry James Potter, Remus Johan Lupin, and Nymphadora Eugenie Tonks to swear a written wizard's oath that you are who you say you are."

The three did this, presumably to counter anyone who might be using Polyjuice Potion. Nothing untoward happened, so Fortrap brought out one sheet of parchment and began reading:

This is the Last Will and Testament of Sirius Edgar Black, heir of the House of Black. I testify on this date of May 31st, 1996 that I am of sound mental and physical health and I am under no undue influence at all as I make these bequests.

Remus, Tonks, Harry.....I know you would rather have me back alive than get what I'm giving you here, but the sad fact remains that I'm gone. I hope I had a good death, and didn't get run over by some idiot muggle car or something inane like that, but these events can't be chosen, they choose us. Please don't mourn me too much, but smile when you think of something funny I did or said, and know that I'm in a better place. I love you all, and remember that you being in my life made it so much better.

To Nymphadora Tonks (oh I love writing your first name Tonks, stop squirming) I leave the sum of one million galleons. Have fun with it girl, quit working for that idiot Fudge if you have a mind to, the world is your oyster.

To Remus Lupin I leave the sum of one million galleons and the deed to Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Let Dumbledore keep using it for the Order if you like Remus, or kick him out, I don't care. Unfortunately Kreacher comes with the house, make sure his end is fitting ok?

To Harry Potter I leave the rest of my money, which as of today is 1.23 million galleons, and the deed to a small island in the south Caribbean Sea. Remember that tropical bird that delivered those letters to you Harry? That's where it came from, I had a good time hiding there, I should have thought of it years earlier. I also bequeath to you every single book in the library of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, you need them more than Remus does, Merlin knows.

Please look out for and care for each other, you are my family and I miss you as much as I hope you miss me. Good luck.

Sirius Edgar Black

Harry's face was expressionless as he tried as hard as he could to hold it inside him. He was more than grateful that the will had not been a recording of some sort from Sirius, he knew he would have broken down at that. Remus didn't bother holding it in as tears streamed down his face, but he remained quiet as he gripped Harry's shoulder. Tonks was smiling, she was taking Sirius' message to heart and remembering him very fondly. The fact that she was rich hadn't penetrated yet.

They stood up from their chairs, Ron and Luna hugged Harry tightly as a couple of tears rolled down his cheeks. He turned to Fortrap, who was watching Harry with great interest.

"How much of this can I access right now? Or do I have to wait until I'm 17 to do so?"

"You may do what you wish with your money Mr. Potter, a total sum just shy of two million galleons if memory serves me. The underage restrictions you currently are saddled with do not apply when you enter this bank or any of our branches. They only apply to spell casting as far as I know, and nobody is fool enough to try and use a wand here."

"Thank you Fortrap, one more question: Why do I have a vault in Canada? I noticed it listed on the parchment you sent me last week."

"To be honest Mr. Potter I'm not quite sure, and I did do some digging a couple of years ago when I saw it. I do know that your father opened the vault with a deposit of 5,000 galleons when he was 19 years old. Perhaps he was making a back-up place to hide for he and your mother, who knows. You may transfer the balance to your account here if you like, it can be done by next Monday."

"No Fortrap, let's leave it there for now. I don't need very much money at the moment and it's not doing any harm there in Toronto. I would like to make an appointment to come see you later on next week if I may, I have some gifts and payments I would like to discuss."

"Whenever you like Mr. Potter, I understand you have some legal issues pending, so just owl me a day or so ahead of time and I will create some room in my schedule." Harry goggled a bit at that.

"How did you know about that? We just did it yesterday."

"We have our ways Mr. Potter, no need to fret. Now, the bequests Mr. Black left to the three of you will be transferred to your vaults this afternoon, they will be ready for access by tea time. Good day to you all."

They left Fortrap's office and went back into the lobby. Remus and Tonks left, promising to meet the kids later at the Leaky Cauldron. Harry took a few minutes to make a trip to his vault, returning with 3 bags full of coin. He gave one each to Ron and Luna.

"I want each of you to have these.....and before you object Ron I want you to know that I'm not trying to buy anything here other than some amusement.....I want the joy of watching you spend each and every galleon in your bags, that goes for you as well Luna. Nothing serious can be bought with it, only fun stuff. Buy new brooms, new clothes, books, toys, whatever you want. We have 2 ½ hours until

Dumbledore and I don't want the smile to leave my face. That is your mission, should you choose to accept it.....and you'd better accept it."

Ron and Luna looked through their bags and saw about 1000 galleons in each of them. They looked at each other and didn't know what to do. Luna looked intently at Harry, with her wide eyes:

"You don't have to do this Harry, money means very little to me."

"I know I don't have to, that's why I did it, because I want to. Like I said, watching you spend that money will make me much happier than if I was to buy things with it." Ron's facial expressions changed second by second, Harry could tell that his pride was in danger of taking over and refusing the money.

"Ron, mate. Just please accept a gift from me."

"Ok Harry, I know that you mean well by it. Thank you mate, I know I've been pretty jealous of you in the past, about you being famous and rich.....but after last night and today....I don't know that I would trade places with you. I know I want to help you carry the burden if I can, and if watching me spend some money will make you happy, then I would be a prat if I said no."

Harry grinned, threw an arm each around Ron and Luna, and they walked out of the bank.

End Chapter

Author's Notes: Ok, that was a strange way to end a chapter I know, and a strange gesture that is totally out of character with the Harry that we know. That's the point, it was something a bit odd, and was a small way of interjecting my own feelings into the story (I would certainly do something like that if I ever win the lottery).

Now I know I promised you a hearing and trial in this chapter, and my only explanation for their not being here is this: I was wrong to say they were going to be in this chapter. I've been wrong before and I'm sure I will be again in the future. I know everyone was expecting

another momentous chapter full of fights and arguments, but I decided to let things play out a bit slower.

Now as to Chapter 10 and my end note asking you for your input....the response was amazing, fully 90 people reviewed Chapter 10 as of 3:30 am Eastern Time Thursday morning. That's more than had reviewed the entire story up to that point. All I can say is Thank You Very Much. I read all of the reviews and made notes of who felt what about the future direction, and the results were so:

Go to North America received 26 votes

Stay in Britain received 24 votes

Do both received 12 votes

No opinion received 28 votes

No opinion means that the review either didn't mention a preference, or the reviewer flat out said they didn't care, just keep writing. I'll tell you now that Harry is going to stay in Britain and cut a deal to return to Hogwarts. That was what I was laying seeds for in chapters 9 and 10, its where I genuinely want to go with the story. Now you might say "But America won, 26-24", and you'd be right. I asked for feedback in case there was an overwhelming feeling one way or the other. If say, the vote had been 40-10, Harry would be packing his bags and booking his flight. I still might do a Harry leaves version, but I don't see starting it until the New Year, and after a bit more planning than I've done so far (I understand that there are these really cool things called outlines, and I'm going to avail myself of one). I can't emphasize enough that I myself don't know what's coming, I'm making this story up paragraph by paragraph.

Now usually I don't address specific review comments in the Author's Notes (Bfer Bear and Amiable Dorsai notwithstanding), I prefer to simply weave my answers into the story itself, like the bullet theory. However, there were so many reviews for this chapter that brought a few questions out that I felt I should answer, however vaguely:

Luna: why Luna? One reason is that I think that JK is going there, all of the very few Luna fics out there point to the scene in Phoenix where they talk about the veil and Harry offers to help her find her things and I'm in agreement there. Once again, I could be wrong, but JK is certainly leaving it open. Another reason is simply that I like Luna, I think she presents a lot of possibilities, and she shows a window into Ravenclaw House, the House least served by the books and the many fics I've read. Reviewer Dumbledore notes that Luna is very close to being a Mary Sue, since so little is known about her, and I totally agree. The thing is, so is every other female character not named Hermione Granger, and I've shown you what I think of her. Even Ginny is pretty much of a cipher in the books. There is not going to be a ton of romance in this story, but Harry/Luna is going to be around for awhile.

Harry should stay in Britain but be apprenticed to someone. A few people suggested that one, and I would do it except for one thing: Apprentice Potter, by Draco664. Its one of my 2 or 3 favorite HP fics and I can't imagine doing the scenario any better.....or even differently enough to matter. Check out his story, it's a winner.

No Voldemort yet.....oh he's coming, don't worry. He's going to be a different Voldemort though, more thoughtful and cunning, not the screaming, Crucio-ing madman that a lot of fics have. Ralph Fiennes is going to play him in the movies, and I'm going to model my Voldemort on him, and what I think he will bring to it.....this is just a theory of course, since this story will be done long before Goblet the movie is released.

Godric's Hollow will be explained in a future chapter, I haven't forgotten about it.

Hermione.....Movie 3 really softened Hermione, and while it worked better for the movie, it was the most unrealistic bit of storytelling. I will be doing things with Hermione, never fear, but keep in mind that many childhood friendships don't last a lifetime, and are sundered by less weighty things than a war.

Just for trivia purposes, Peter Tyson was my best friend at university, Travis Biller was my best friend in high school. Travis would indeed

be a Gryffindor I think, but we've lost touch and I don't know what he's doing now, he joined the army right after high school, so the Auror thing fits him. Peter is a high school teacher, who I think would be more a Hufflepuff. They're both great guys, and my using their names is a fun way of acknowledging that. I'll say right now that those two won't be major characters once Harry is back to Hogwarts.....probably.

Draco Malfoy: I'm going to come up with something for him I'm sure, but don't bet on it being a 'Draco turns to the good side' kind of scenario. I agree that it's plausible enough, its just not a direction I want to go.

Punctuation: My use of commas and semi-colons needs work I know, and thank you for not ragging on me about it.

That's all for now, take care folks, see you at the next chapter (in the wee early hours of Saturday morning).

“Ok you two, where are we going first?”

“Quality Quidditch Supplies!”

“Eyelops Owl Emporium!”

(Do I need to tell you who said what? Didn’t think so)

“May I make a suggestion?”

They both nodded.

“Let’s go look at trunks, you remember me telling you about Moody’s trunk, the one with 7 compartments?” Ron started smiling, Luna didn’t really care either way, she put her arm around his waist and smiled up at him.

“Lead on Harry, do you know where to go?”

“Yes I do, I asked the twins last night and they told me to go to a place called Trunkenstein, all they do is sell magical trunks. There’s a catch though.....it’s a few yards into Knockturn Alley.” Ron didn’t turn a hair:

“So? What are we waiting for. I’ve always wanted to go into Knockturn Alley. What do you think Luna?”

“I’m up for it, though I’ve been in Knockturn Alley loads of times with Daddy.” Harry and Ron both stared at her, this was unexpected.

“Oh don’t give me those looks, Daddy talks to people there all the time for Quibbler stuff, sometimes I go with him. I’ve never been by myself or bought anything, this should be fun.”

With that they took off for the entrance to Knockturn Alley, something they had to rely on Luna for, since she was the most familiar with it.

“Now boys, the key to walking about Knockturn Alley is to act as if you belong there, people tend to notice you more if you look like you’re afraid or if you’re hiding something. It’s highly unlikely that

anyone is going to attack us in broad daylight, so just relax." Ron snorted:

"Easy for you to say Luna, you're always relaxed."

"And that's bad.....why?"

"Point taken, let's go in."

The three of them spotted Trunkenstein almost right away, but spent a few minutes walking around and seeing what other kind of shops there were. They saw quite a few knick-knack stores, plus many stores dealing with animals. One such store was filled with snakes and Harry had to cover his ears because of the sound of all the snakes that were yelling.....and yelling some not so nice things in the bargain. Quite a few stores had no sign on the front saying what they did, if you had to ask you didn't belong there. Harry took note of a few shops that he wanted to visit later on.

They doubled back and entered the trunk store, a wizard that appeared to be in his mid-40's was sitting by the counter reading the Daily Prophet. He looked up as the teens came in the door. The store was of course full of trunks, they looked to be around the same size and had a variety of colors and outside features. The shop wasn't a large one by any means, about one-third the size of the twins' place.

"Hello there youngsters, what can I do for you?" The devil on Harry's shoulder badly wanted him to say what a stupid question that was, of course they were there for trunks, but the angel on the other side won out as usual. Harry was quite enjoying exploring his Slytherin side on occasion though.

"Hello sir, we heard about your shop and wanted to explore each buying a wizard's trunk. Fred and George Weasley told us about it."

"Ah the twins, fun pair those are. The tall one here must be a brother, you look just like them. What kind of trunks do you have now?" Ron answered for them:

"Yeah, I'm their younger brother, and we each have just a normal one compartment trunk....right?" Harry and Luna nodded their agreement. "We heard about a trunk that one of our former professors had that had 7 different compartments."

"Ah, you mean Mad-Eye Moody's trunk, that was a beaut, one of my best. I have a few of those available, I don't make too many, hard to sell. They are pretty expensive though, a bit more than most school kids would need or want I would think."

Harry was quite curious now, he knew that money wasn't a factor here, he could easily expand Luna and Ron's bags if he chose to. "We'd like to see one sir, if you don't mind."

"Sure thing, come along with me to the back, we keep those back there. I'm Anthony Hook by the way, but call me Tony."

"Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, pleased to meet you Tony."

"Likewise, shall we?"

They went into the back of the store, which was a bit bigger than the front and had a couple of clearly unfinished trunks in various states of completion. He approached a navy blue one and pointed to it.

"Here's your basic 7 compartment trunk. What it is, the first 3 layers are simply for storing things, like your normal muggle trunk, which I assume is you what you all have?" Seeing their nods he continued "The last 4 compartment are for all intents and purposes a flat, and can be accessed by entering any of the 4 entrances. On the outside there is a security panel that works on fingerprints or voice identification, whichever you choose....though once you choose one of them you can't change your mind. I personally chose the fingerprint one for my personal trunk, since it is Polyjuice protected for some reason, don't ask me how. I got the idea from a muggle movie and had a friend of mine design it for me. Works great though." He saw Harry practically salivating while looking at the trunk and knew he had at least one sale. "Any questions?"

“Can someone live in the trunk for an extended period of time?”

“Sure they can, as long as their food and water holds out. The water has to be supplied from one of those long-lasting tanks, I think that one person could use one for about a year before it runs out. But sure, a person could use the trunk as living quarters.”

“What are the differences among them?”

“None really, I just make the basic trunk and let the buyer decorate it themselves. It cuts down on my costs and ensures that people are getting exactly what they want on the inside. Like I said, just like an unfurnished flat. The only difference is in the color of the outside of the trunk.” Harry thought of another question:

“Can the trunk be moved while someone is in it?”

“Only if the person moving the trunk has been approved through the voice or fingerprint identification, that’s the only way to budge it off its spot on the floor. Let’s say that you were in the trunk and your Weasley friend here wanted to pull a prank on you and move it to the dungeons or something, he could only do that if you had keyed him in with the ID. Or say if a Death Eater, Mr. Potter, wanted to kidnap you, he wouldn’t be able to.” Tony smiled.

Harry smirked and shrugged his shoulders, everyone knew why he had asked that question. He instantly had another:

“Is there a floo in them? Or some other way of traveling between the trunks?”

“Good question there lad, yes there is an internal floo in each of these, but only in the 7 compartment trunks, you couldn’t floo to or between the lesser models. It also won’t floo to regular fireplaces, even though you use the same kind of floo powder. That’s to prevent unwanted persons from popping in unannounced.”

“Now for the big question Tony, how much are these trunks?”

"For 3 of them? Hmm....I should probably give you a bulk discount...."

"Oh no, I want 6 of them total." He looked at the other two and said "Neville and Ginny....the twins share everything else, they can share a trunk."

"Oh my, a big order.....let's go for 10,000 galleons for all 6. I have enough of them ready to go that you can take them out of here today."

"Done. Now I don't have that kind of money on me at the moment. Hang on a second. Dobby!! Winky!!" he called out, and his elves popped into the store, startling Tony.

"I have never gotten used to that, handy to have around though."

"Dobby, I want you to take this key and go to Gringotts and get a bank draft for 10,000 galleons, then come back here." He handed his Gringotts key to Dobby, who popped away. He then turned back to Tony:

"Am I right in thinking that each owner has to be keyed in by you?"

"Not necessarily, but it is much easier if I explain to the owners how the system works. Then they can authorize whomever they want."

"Good, Winky please go get Neville at his home in Brighton, just tell him to floo here, but not why. Then when you get done there, go to WWW and get 2 of the Weasleys, we can't be taking all 3 of them away from their shop at the same time. Got it?"

Winky nodded and popped away to Brighton.

"Now you two, use the other money I gave you to decorate your trunks. These trunks aren't a gift, they're an investment in our safety when we're at school. You're still getting your Christmas presents so Ron, I don't want to hear any arguments."

It turns out that Ron had no intention of arguing, he immediately saw the wisdom in having a privacy system while they were at school, and he said as much, surprising Harry. Likewise Luna was in favor of the idea, it would be nice to have her own private place to go to, especially if her housemates were going to be prats. She didn't think they would be though, Harry had mentioned that morning that he would be making a large effort to get Ravenclaw more involved in his defense group. Given that Hermione was iffy, it would make sense to have at least Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot, the top two students of the year, on board.

Dobby came back and handed Harry a piece of paper with the Gringotts crest on it. Harry gave it to Tony Hook, who didn't bother to give more than a second's glace at the check before putting it in his pocket, he knew it would be good.....fame did after all have its privileges.

Neville came tumbling out of the floo, doing a nice roll and popped right up. He wasn't wearing robes, but a t-shirt and shorts with a decent amount of dirt on both, clearly he'd been in the garden. Seconds later George and Ginny crashed into Neville, who hadn't quite gotten out of the floo entrance. They all went down in a heap and laid there laughing, joined by those lucky ones standing. George greeted Tony like an old friend, trust one of the twins to have a working knowledge of Knockturn Alley. The newcomers looked at Harry to find out what was going on.

"These are your new trunks guys.....well, half your new trunk George anyway. They're deluxe 7 compartment deals with an internal floo and room to live, just what we need to stay safe and make future plans in. They come with their own security system, which Tony is about to explain to you."

Ginny, Neville, and George didn't look as surprised as one might think, Harry had hit them with so many over the years that little he said shocked them anymore. Tony took them through the instructions and how to work the security. They all keyed everyone into all the trunks, remembering the details so that they could add Fred, who was overseeing the shop. George shrunk all 6 of the trunks and pocketed his, Ron's and Harry's for transport back to the shop. He would have

taken Ginny's too, but she glared at him and said that she wanted to carry it around for awhile. Ron muttered to Harry that she was the Weasley who least needed privacy, after all she was the only girl and had of necessity had her own room. He didn't say this too loudly though. Ginny and George went back to work, Neville back to his garden, all of them hugging Harry thank you and assuring him that they would be there at The Leaky Cauldron at 2pm.

It was now 12:30, time for a long lunch before the meeting with Dumbledore. Ron, Luna, and Harry decided to go into Muggle London and visit the new Pizza Hut that had opened across the road from The Leaky Cauldron. After they ordered their lunch Ron broached the subject that he'd been thinking about since the previous night:

"Harry, what are we going to do about Hermione? Are we really throwing away a five year friendship because of Dumbledore?"

"I don't know Ron, it does look that way doesn't it?.....Ron, what are your true feelings for her? Do you like her in 'that' way?"

"I don't know Harry, its complicated. I do have some feelings for her yes.....and I think she's pretty, that's for sure. But.....I don't know if I see the two of us as a couple, at least as a couple that works. I don't know if I can be a boyfriend to a girl who clearly thinks that she knows best about everything, and doesn't hesitate to tell me so. I've been biting my tongue just as much as you have in the last year Harry, probably more so since I spend more time with her.....c'mon, I've noticed that you've held back on her."

"The thing is Harry, I can separate the friendship and the potential relationship, but after last night is that friendship dead?"

"I think it is Ron, at least for me. Merlin knows I don't want to just get rid of Hermione, but I just don't know how much more I can stand of being constantly told what to do. Hermione has been very loyal to us Ron, probably more so than we've been to her if we're honest with each other.....but how much of her loyalty is a lack of options? You said it yourself right before that troll during first year 'surely she's noticed that she has no friends'.....and we really don't seem like

her kind of people Ron, library types who don't care about Quidditch or Exploding Snap seem more her ilk. I think part of that was realized last night, when she didn't cross the room. And when I say realized, I mean by both her and me. I think we finally asked her for one sacrifice too many Ron." Ron contemplated this while Luna spoke up:

"The question is Ronald, is this something you can live with? You are an equal partner in your friendship with Hermione you know. I'm confident that Harry doesn't want to make your decision for you."

"I made my choice last night Harry, you know that.....I just feel guilty about it, like we're leaving her alone there, Malfoy will just love it."

"We'll still make sure Malfoy doesn't get nasty with her, she's still a member of our House and deserves protection as much as anyone. Plus I think the teachers will be looking out for her more, they'll know what her situation is."

That seemed to settle that, for the time being anyway. They teens ate their pizza and drank their Pepsi while just chatting about things. They talked little about the coming meeting with Dumbledore, instead they argued about Quibbler articles, talked about what changes they'd make if they were Minister of Magic, and discussed how strict Luna should be if she was made prefect. Harry and Luna also made Ron blush by critiquing various girls as candidates to be Ron's girlfriend. Luna was in favor of Susan Bones, while Harry made Ron shiver by promoting Lavender Brown. Harry knew that it would be much easier if their new trio became a quartet, plus he loved how happy Luna made him, and he wanted the same for Ron.

Soon it was 1:50 pm, time to face some music across the street. Harry paid the bill and the trio walked over to The Leaky Cauldron. Peter was waiting for them.

"Hi there guys, no new developments in the Snape case, he's still in the holding cell in the DMLE. His trial is scheduled for Monday, I'm supposed to deliver this summons to appear in front of the Wizengamot as a witness and as one of the complaintants." He gave Harry the piece of parchment. "I popped over to your Aunt and Uncle and gave them theirs. I explained to them what was going on and that

you had preemptively decided to move out. They were in agreement, but kept the giggles to themselves. While I was at the Ministry I checked on our petition, and as far as I know Dumbledore hasn't seen or heard of it ....yet. Are you going to hit him with it today?"

"Maybe, I want to see how the meeting starts first, and who is there. Is Dumbledore going to be reasonable or does he need a show of strength after what happened last night? That's the question, and only he can answer it."

"True.....Harry are you willing to bargain Snape for your freedom? In other words, no jail time in exchange for Dumbledore either endorsing the petition, or at the very least not opposing it?"

"In a second, if that's what it will take....but I want to keep that option hidden for a time, see if I can have my cake and eat it too. For now I'll bargain with me being the so-called 'superweapon' and how it might not go too well if I don't cooperate."

"Good plan, I talked to Tom and he has a private room that we can use. Ready?"

They nodded and followed Peter to the back room. They were the first ones there and took seats far from the door. Next in was Fred, he apparently was the representative from WWW for this meeting. He thanked Harry for the trunk and assured him that Harry's and Ron's trunks were in their room at WWW, though Ron grumbled that he'd have to back to Grimmauld Place that night probably. They had agreed at the shop that the extra features of the trunks was to remain a secret from most others, including Molly and Arthur. Harry wasn't worried about them telling Dumbledore, not after last night, but he felt that the fewer people who knew, the better.

Over the next 10 minutes everyone from the previous night filed into the room (except George and Ginny of course), no one wanted to miss this. Hermione had a blank look on her face as she came in, Harry couldn't tell what she was thinking. Dumbledore was the last to arrive. He greeted everyone and the quiet talking ceased, all eyes and ears on Harry and Dumbledore.

"Hello Harry, good to see you."

"Likewise Professor, thank you for coming."

"What shall we start with Harry? I'm assuming that you have a list of grievances prepared."

"How did you ever guess Professor? You haven't been reading my mind again have you?" It was said with a smile, but no one laughed. The shot hit right where Harry intended and Dumbledore had the grace to look a bit embarrassed. "Let's get the most unpleasant topic out of the way first, Snape. I know you were unsuccessful in getting him out and I have a summons to his trial on Monday.....but before we get into that, I have a question. Why is Snape getting a trial so quickly when the Death Eaters captured at the Department of Mysteries haven't been given their trials yet? I would think that I would be a prime witness at those trials and I haven't heard a thing."

"Well Harry, there is great debate on whether to give them trials. Minister Fudge is determined to take a hard stance on them, given the public thrashings he has received in The Daily Prophet and The Quibbler. Even Witch Weekly has weighed in against him. If he has his way they'll be hidden away in Azkaban and forgotten about.....until Voldemort attempts to free them that is, if that's what his plans are."

"Why wouldn't they be? Doesn't he need those people?"

"Harry, Voldemort does indeed need all the support he can get, but I would not think that he is too pleased with 10 Death Eaters who couldn't defeat a largely ill-trained group of 6 school children. He might just leave them there as an example to the troops he has left, I don't know."

"What about Umbridge?"

"She is in St. Mungo's Harry, she flinches violently every time she hears a footstep, thinking it's a Centaur I imagine."

"Good riddance. How bout that? Two out of five Defense teachers are now housed in St. Mungo's, you really know how to pick them Professor."

"I didn't pick her Harry as you well know, she was forced upon me by Fudge, a practice that has ended I should tell you, I have next term's Defense teacher already hired. I have every confidence in her."

"Her? So it isn't going to be Remus?"

"No Harry, I have other duties in mind for Remus, some at Hogwarts, some not. No, the new professor is named Melissa Bliss, she's a former Auror who has been teaching at Beauxbatons the last two years."

"Well I'll believe she's good when I see it.....Now let's get on with Snape shall we? What do you want to say about him."

"Do you really want him in Azkaban Harry? Will that make you happy?"

"Yes it will Professor. The man has hated my guts since the moment I entered your school....'Mr. Potter, our new celebrity' were his first words to me, and it hasn't stopped since. I can handle that he dislikes Gryffindors, I mean everyone else dislikes his own House, but his rank hatred of us is inexcusable. It also has a direct effect on the quality of teaching that we receive from him, if you can call what he does teaching. I mean, how many 'O's did our year get on our Potions OWL's? How would Neville and I, to name two, have fared if we didn't have five years of a professor who took such obvious delight in our failures.....obvious and public I might add. You encourage this, Professor, by doing nothing to stop it. So do you Professor McGonagall, you play right into Snape's hands by not reciprocating, or at least not protecting us."

McGonagall had the class to look a bit ashamed as Harry threw that in her face, while Dumbledore's expression didn't change.

"Most of all Professor Dumbledore, I don't trust Snape. That's what it boils down to. I know he spies for the Order and that you and he have

some sort of history where he spied for you before. However since no one has seen fit to tell me what that's all about, I have no choice but to view Snape through the lens of how he has behaved toward me and my friends, and my House. What I'm saying Professor is that your boy Snape scares me. One day he's going to snap and either try to kill me, or allow someone else to. Putting him in Azkaban, for a very real crime I might add, is the best way for me to feel safe in your school. Now I know what you're going to say, that I should rise above personal feelings and do what is best for the Order and for the anti-Voldemort forces.....but why should I be the only one? Why can't he do that? We both know that Snape is as good as convicted when I show the Wizengamot my pensieve memory, you tell me why I should let him go."

Dumbledore sighed, in his mind he acknowledged as true everything Harry had said, and that damage had been done by Snape that shouldn't have.....

"Harry, you've asked me repeatedly why I trust Professor Snape, and while I agree that you deserve an answer, its not that simple for me to just tell you straight out. Severus Snape was bred to hate, his parents were strong dark-side supporters and they indoctrinated their son very well. The Sorting Hat put him in Slytherin in less than a second, and he was one of the most talented students we had in his year. Unfortunately he also came into contact with your father and his friends, and with Neville's father as well. There was an instant and seven year long hatred among them. The incident you saw in the pensieve was one of many, though I would be remiss in implying that it was only one-sided. Severus joined the Death Eaters very early on, officially getting his mark as soon as he graduated, but unofficially it was much earlier."

"Something began happening to Severus though, soon after he took the Dark Mark he began to develop a conscience, a development he found quite troubling at first. He began to look at the things he was doing and started to feel ashamed. This is not an uncommon feeling among Death Eaters Harry, Voldemort is quite adamant in the tasks he sets them, muggle tortures are routine. There appeared to be no way out though Harry, Severus was by then known as a Death Eater, something not easily forgiven. Then he happened to be in the

Hogshead Pub in Hogsmeade the night I interviewed a young woman for the post of Divination Professor. You know what happened that night Harry, she spoke of a Prophecy that would lead to Voldemort's downfall, and Severus saw his way out, he saw that there was hope. One week later he came to me and threw himself on my mercy. He offered to be our spy in Voldemort's council, a task he performed for 2 years without being discovered. He was the one who told us that the Potters and Longbottoms were to be targeted, and how Voldemort came to know about the Prophecy in the first place. We arrested many Death Eaters on his information, both before and after Voldemort's defeat. Can you possibly imagine what would have happened to him if he had been caught? What Voldemort personally would have done to him? Take what you're thinking and multiply it by 100 and you won't be close."

"Then, after all of that, he volunteers to relive that life again, last year. He has repeatedly risked his life for our side Harry. I know he's not the most pleasant person in the world, and I will admit that I have been too tolerant of his behavior on the whole.....but you must understand Harry, when I see Severus I can't help but think of what he did for us, for me....that's the Severus Snape I see, not the person you despise."

Harry and the rest of the room sat there, thinking. Dumbledore made a persuasive case, the man did have charisma that would rival the most successful politician. Harry pondered this for a moment:

"That was a lovely testimonial Professor, very well said.....and before I give you my reaction I have a question for you: Let's say, for a minute, that I do as you request and not press charges against Snape.....what will happen to him? What will you do to ensure that something like that doesn't happen again?"

"I will have a serious talk with Professor Snape Harry, either way. I will guarantee that he will never draw his wand on you in anger again, I'm willing to swear a Wizard's Oath to that effect."

"An oath that is contingent on someone else's behavior? What would you do if he violated it?"

"It won't come to that Harry, I promise you."

"I'm sorry Professor, but I don't believe you. I don't believe that any talk with Snape will be enough to get him beyond this. He undoubtedly hates me more than ever now, I have every confidence that he feels I'm totally at fault for last night, even though he shot the spells, not I. That alone is enough to keep him locked away."

Harry's group all nodded at that, as did Tonks and McGonagall. It was easy to see Snape blaming Harry for his imprisonment, heck, he blamed Harry for bad weather.

"That said Professor Dumbledore, I'm not unreasonable. I'm willing to discuss my dropping of the charges against Snape, with a few conditions, as long as the rest of my issues in this meeting are dealt with to my satisfaction."

"You are willing to blackmail me Harry?"

"More or less Professor. My demands won't be too exorbitant, my conditions for Snape himself not too bad. Keep in mind one key thing, if your boy hadn't lost control most of this wouldn't be necessary."

"Very well Harry, what are the rest of your issues."

"First, and this is non-negotiable in any way shape or form.....I will never set foot in Privet Drive again, nor will I spend one night under any roof controlled by Vernon and Petunia Dursley."

"Harry, you must stay with your aunt for at least one month a year to renew the blood protections. You know this. Your safety is paramount."

"Yet you didn't much care sending a man who hates me over to that house to break into my mind. Leaving that aside, I want you tell your people why its so paramount, as you call it, to keep me safe. I've told my group the Prophecy, now its your turn.....and if you don't, I will."

Dumbledore didn't argue, he knew the cat was already out of the bag if Harry had shared this information with his friends. He told the room

the Prophecy. The nods coming from the Order members implied that they figured it was something like that.

"Thank you Professor, for saving me the hassle. Look at this in a practical manner, I would only be at Privet Drive for one more week this summer anyway. Next summer will be one month and then I'll leave whatever you say, so its only 5 weeks in actuality that I have to be there. Another practical consideration is my sanity, which won't last much longer under the same roof as those people. One more summer there and there will be trouble with Vernon, either I'll kill him or he'll kill me. Speaking of which, what did you threaten them with if they didn't take me?"

"I did threaten them Harry, yes. It's not something I'm proud of, but it had to be done. I told them that I would divulge their location to every dark wizard in Britain, and not protect them in the slightest.....It was not my finest hour Harry, but I did what was necessary. You have been safe there for 15 years, even the Dementor incident happened outside the grounds of Number 4 Privet Drive, and could not have happened inside of them. I cannot say the same for any other location in Britain, even Grimmauld Place."

"Well you will withdraw that threat, or I will go right to the Wizengamot with it and have you arrested. I have no doubt my relatives will press charges. I will have a hard time ever forgiving you for making me live there with people who despised me from the minute they saw me.....does that sound familiar? Snape, the Dursleys.....I sense a pattern Professor. I want them all out of my life, for good. I am willing to take the risk of leaving the blood protection behind, its my risk Professor, its my life."

"We need to think of what is best for all the people Harry, not just you."

"I will not be kept a prisoner Professor, the sooner you get that through your head the better off we will all be. I have no wish to die, and I will keep myself as safe as possible while still actually living a life. You have no right to decide this for me now, let alone next year when I turn 17, which is a year from this coming Tuesday. I repeat, I do not accept your authority to decide this for me."

Dumbledore decided a delay was best, after all he was planning to have Harry leave Privet Drive next week anyway, he could always try to change the lad's mind later, "Ok Harry, on one condition.....that I know where you are living at all times, and that you keep at least one emergency port-key on you at all times, that will take you straight to my office."

"That is two conditions Professor, if you want to be technical. Like I said, I'm not unreasonable and those are both fair, so I accept."

"Good, I'm sure that was the thorniest of issues. What else?"

"I want official sanction for the DA, and the right to run it the way I want to run it."

"And what way is that Harry?"

"I want to teach them the spells that I feel are best, and I want the right to exclude people if I want to.....and before you say it, I want Slytherins in the group, just not Malfoy and his crowd. I have difficulty believing that all Slytherins are evil, even if I can't quite convince Ron of that (everyone chuckled). I have every interest in reaching out to the reasonable Slytherins, however many of them there might be."

"Well Harry I must admit that is a pleasant surprise, and I agree. I would want you to have a faculty sponsor as well, if it is to be a school sanctioned club."

"That's fine, I was going to suggest it anyway.....but not the Defense teacher. I want Professor Flitwick, if he agrees."

Dumbledore's eyebrows raised, this was unexpected, but not unwelcome. He knew how good Filius was with his students, and imagined that Harry wanted to expand on his charm work, which was already the best in his year.

"Who will help you run your group Harry?"

"I will have liaison officers with all the Houses. Ron and Neville will be them for Gryffindor (Hermione gave a start as she heard this), and I have people in mind for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. I'm not willing to say who yet, I would like to sound them out first. Once they are set, I'll start attempting to make inroads into Slytherin." McGonagall spoke up:

"Professor Snape won't make that easy for you Harry, he won't trust you with his students."

"That will not be a problem Professor McGonagall, I have a plan all worked out for that. Are we agreed on all my terms so far Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes we are Harry.....you said so far, there are more?"

"Just one final item.....the disposition of Severus Snape....I will not allow him to get off scot-free, he must receive some sort of punishment and I need some reassurance. So here it is: Severus Snape is to resign as a Professor of Potions at Hogwarts and never be allowed direct contact with a student within its walls again as long as he lives. This way he can continue to spy on Voldemort for you, and he will not be able to terrorize helpless children. In return for this, which I want in writing and filed with the Ministry before I lift a finger, I will not press charges against Snape for attacking me, and I will turn a temporary blind eye while you convince my relatives not to press charges for unlawful entry."

Dumbledore sat in his chair for a couple of minutes, chewing this deal over in his mind. He was all to aware that it could have been worse, on the whole. Harry's protection could be modified, and deep down he did understand that Severus was a bad teacher. He hadn't told Harry, but only 4 students received 'O's on their Potions Owls (Boot, Turpin, Malfoy, and Zabini), an all-time low. He knew he could get Severus to agree, he had not told Harry and the group all of the reasons for Severus' loyalty over the years, some things were best kept to himself for the time being. He even knew of someone who could take over the Potions job on short notice. Hmmmmm.....

"Very well Harry, I agree to all of your terms. Where are you planning to live for the remainder of the summer?"

"I have set up shop, so to speak, in a room at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, where I'm a partner with Gred and Forge. They offered it to me last night and I accepted. I'm not sure where I will stay next summer, I may go house hunting during Winter Holiday. Wherever I decide to live, it will likely be in Muggle London, I feel I can be safer there, where I'm not so recognizable."

"A good idea Harry, you're becoming more cautious as you grow older, that's good. Now I'm fairly certain that I can convince Severus to agree to continue aiding us, it might even look better if he leaves Hogwarts this way. Let us go over to the DMLE and get this done Harry." He stood up to go, but noticed Harry wasn't moving.

"Not so fast Professor, there's just one small detail that must be done, and unless Peter corrects me, it can't be done until Monday morning."

Peter nodded his head in the affirmative, as a puzzled Dumbledore tried to deduce what else there could be.

"What else must be done Harry?"

"Yesterday, Peter filed a petition, on my behalf, for my legal emancipation. On Monday morning the three of us are going to go to the Ministry and get that approved....then I will agree to drop the charges on Snape, but only then. I'm sure you will be at your persuasive best to ensure it."

"Well well Harry, you are full of surprises, now the full meaning of Peter here becomes clear. Very clever.....very Slytherin of you."

"Just following your example Professor. All it means is that I will live where I want, which you've already agreed not to fight, and I get to do a bit of extra spell work, which we all acknowledge that I need, what with my responsibilities and all. This just makes it nice and legal."

Dumbledore shook his head in amusement, this was going to be a difficult year.....how was he going to deal with a forward thinking Harry Potter?

One more thing: One galleon equals 3.5 British pounds equals 5 dollars (is that really what the exchange rate was in 1996? Who cares?)

The meeting broke up, and people began to file out of the room. Harry tried to catch Hermione's eye so that she would stick around, but she looked right through him and left with Tonks. McGonagall walked up to Harry and motioned him to step aside with her for a private talk.

"Well Harry, quite the change in you I'm seeing, and a welcome one at that."

"Thanks ma'am.....I think." They both laughed, Harry realized that compliments from McGonagall didn't exactly fall like rain from the sky.

"Professor, I never got a chance to thank you for the things you said during my career counseling session with that hag. It meant a lot to me, standing up to her like that, I know what you risked by doing it."

"Harry, you have so much potential in you, and I'm cognizant of the fact that we as teachers haven't done all we might have to help you realize it. I know you only got an 'A' on your Potions OWL, but my offer still stands, I will speak to the new professor and make sure you get into the NEWT class.....given what you said a little while ago, I would do the same for Mr. Longbottom."

"Thank you Professor, I may take you up on that, I may not. I'm rethinking my desire to become an Auror.....truth be told I kind of just grabbed on to it on a whim at our meeting, I couldn't think of anything else on that short of notice. At that time I hadn't done any thinking of what I wanted to do with my life after school, but I remember the fake Moody saying that I would make a good Auror, so the idea intrigued me."

"Like I said, a welcome change.....though I do keep forgetting that you're only 15 years old. I should tell you that all of that....woman's educational decrees have been voided, as has your Quidditch ban. I would like you and Miss Bell to decide who is to be captain among the two of you, you've both been on the team for a similar amount of

time, and you each have extra responsibilities this year. Miss Bell is still a Prefect and has NEWTs coming up, while you have your DA and a war to think about. Before you ask, Mr. Weasley is not to be picked, I feel he needs another season of playing before he can handle the pressure of being captain. His nerves got better as the games went on, but not quite enough. If you really want him to be captain next year, that would be fine, but this year it will be you or Miss Bell."

"Thank you Professor, I can't wait to play again....heck, I can't wait to fly again, one of the downsides of living in the muggle world. Quidditch might also work as a future career, assuming I last long enough to have one." McGonagall sighed, she wanted to chastise him for saying something like that, but couldn't argue the truth of it.

"Your school lists will be going out late next week, you'll have to pick your NEWT classes then. Do you have an idea off the top of your head of what classes you wish to take? Other than Potions."

"How many classes do I have to sign up for? Are there any other options besides the classes I've been taking already?"

"You are specifically required to take only Charms and Transfiguration, those are two of the classes that are open to everyone regardless of their OWL score. You must take a minimum of five classes, with a maximum of eight. Even Miss Granger must abide by that rule, letting her use that time turner 3 years ago was not my finest hour I must tell you, though it did work out in the end. As to your question about other classes, not this year. In your 7th year there will be an option for a Magical Healing class, which most students choose to take, since it doesn't require much homework."

"What about students who don't reach the NEWT requirements for five classes? What do they take?"

"There are five classes in total where the OWL scores do not matter: Charms, Transfiguration, History of Magic, Astronomy, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Students who are not very good academically are locked into those classes unless they qualify in another. You have qualified in every class except for Potions. Don't get the idea that

Professor Snape's 'O' standard was just for you, it has been that way for the last 10 years. I'm sure the new professor will lower it to an 'E', otherwise there will be a tiny class."

"Professor, what are my chances on the History NEWT if I read a lot of books, but don't really pay too much attention to Binns? Peter gave me a couple of books on our history and I've been looking them over, I've learned more in a week about our world than in 5 years of Binns."

"You would merely be doing it the Ravenclaw way Mr. Potter, all of them take History at the NEWT level, and I believe that's exactly what they do."

"Good....maybe I'll get so good at it I can replace Binns, that could be a good career." Both of them smiled. "But you wanted an idea of what I would take.....well Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration are givens.....add History to that. Divination is definitely out, I can't stand that class even with Firenze teaching it. Would I be allowed to take Muggle Studies?" I can't abandon Hagrid, so Care of Magical Creatures should be there.....hang on, there's a NEWT standard for Care of Magical Creatures? Really?"

"Yes there is, the creatures get more dangerous and complex as the classes get more advanced. The standard is there for the protection of the students, similar to that of Potions. As to Muggle Studies, yes you would, since you are muggle raised you may take the NEWT class. That's a rule put in place a few years ago to encourage muggle-born students to skip the first 3 years of Muggle Studies so that there would be more room in the third through fifth year classes for students who genuinely don't know about muggles. I tried to advise Miss Granger that, but she was not to be dissuaded. So you have it down to Herbology, Muggle Studies, Astronomy, or Potions to choose from. I know you did well in Herbology, and Professor Sprout thinks highly of you. If I were you, and I wanted just one class out of those four, I would pick Herbology."

"Thank you Professor, I'll do just that, but I'll take Muggle Studies too. In all honesty I want a class that's comparatively easy for me. Seven classes is two fewer than I've been taking, that should be enough. I would appreciate it if you would try to get Neville into the NEWT

Potions class if you could, I'll sound him out to make sure it would be worth the effort for you to do so, and I'll owl you."

"That would be fine Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom's rise in confidence hasn't gone unnoticed by me and the rest of the faculty. I'm sure he'll do better with most of his wand work as well, since he has a new wand. Now I must be going, owl me after you talk with Mr. Longbottom."

"Yes ma'am I will, and thank you for the advice."

"You're welcome Harry.....you be careful now, I'll see you in a month."

She walked out and Harry went over to Ron and Luna, who were waiting for him. He told them what he and McGonagall had talked about. He asked Ron what NEWT classes he would be taking:

"I don't have much choice really. Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Creatures, and Potions if I can get in. I might just stick to five classes only, so I can study harder at them. I'm not going to live in the library, but I know I have to work harder than I have been. What electives do you take Luna?"

"Mine are Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Muggle Studies. I don't care for Divination and I heard enough stories about Hagrid's first year teaching that I just couldn't bring myself to sign up for Creatures."

"Wise move, it should have been called Care of Dangerous Magical Creatures. Harry, I think Peter is still here."

They went out to the pub itself and found Peter and Remus drinking butterbeers and chatting, they appeared to be in the middle of a Filch story by the sound of it. Harry and friends hung back until the story was done, then joined them. Peter looked at them and Harry asked:

"So how do you think that went?"

"It went very well I thought.....are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Remus and Ron looked a bit confused, while Luna smiled.

"Yes I am, it went too easily. He agreed just a bit too fast for comfort about me leaving the Dursleys. He either thinks he can talk me into going back there next summer or he has some other scheme. He had to know it was coming."

"I'm with you on that one, what about Snape?"

"Oh I'm not worried about that, he has no choice. Snape will be the last thing we do tomorrow, everything else will have to be settled first. If its not, then we have a trial and our favorite professor in Azkaban. Dumbledore won't allow that. Here's what I want you to do with the Dursleys, check on them once a month or so, if by Christmas they're not being watched by Dumbledore, have them move. I'll pay the difference to have them move into a better house, as long as they keep it quiet. If they don't go for that, we'll think of something else."

"Not a bad idea, if they'll agree to it. Are they usually watched during the school year?"

"Who knows, he wouldn't tell them about it, and there's no way for them to detect it. Now there's one thing we haven't discussed, and in that you're unlike any TV muggle lawyer I've heard of...your fee. What's this going to cost me?"

"Good question.....let us just take for granted that tomorrow will go smoothly and how we want it to. I will have put a total of around 20 hours into your case...problem...whatever we want to call it. So let's call it 2,000 galleons."

"Sounds fair, and how much to keep you on retainer?"

"Nothing, we'll just take it on a case by case basis for now. Just know that I'll not refuse a request for help from you, I'll always consider you a client as long as you need me to."

"Terrific, that's what I wanted to hear. Here's your fee, by pure luck I had it on me." He handed Peter his own bag of 1,000 galleons, as

well as the bank drafts he had sent for from Gringotts in that letter 8 days ago when he had hired Peter.

"Thank you, this is a pleasant surprise. I'll see you at 8 am Monday morning, just come by my office and we'll floo over to the Ministry. Ron, Luna, will you be joining us?"

"I can't, I have to work in the shop Monday, I know it'll go fine though."

"I'll be there Peter, I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"No doubt. See you kids later." With that Peter walked to the floo and left for his home.

The teens then left for Diagon Alley, they had some trunks to decorate.

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement

5:00 pm

Dumbledore sat at a table in one of the interrogation rooms, waiting for Snape. He had not bothered to try and get his friend released this time, Travis Biller had sown his seeds very well, the looks of contempt that Dumbledore was receiving were disconcerting. Dumbledore knew that his potions professor wasn't the most popular man, but hadn't fully grasped how hated he was. Snape was led into the room by an Auror, he sat down and glared at his mentor.

"So what happened with the brat, when am I getting out of here?"

"Monday, Severus, if things proceed as they should."

"What are you talking about? Did you convince him into dropping those ridiculous charges or not!!??"

Dumbledore sighed, oh how he wished he could lose his temper, that he could afford to, "Severus for the love of God calm down. We must face the facts right now, and yelling will not do anything to help that."

Snape put his head in his hands and sighed. He looked up and seemed much calmer than a few seconds before. "If you insist.....so what happened?"

"Harry and I reached an agreement that he will not press charges against you in return for certain concessions... concessions that I did not want to make Severus, so I would appreciate it if you would not speak to me as you would a first year Gryffindor."

"What concessions? What did that fool want in return?"

"Fool? Judging by the way you fell right into his trap I would say he's anything but a fool. Severus, you must release this hatred somehow. Harry is not his father, as I myself have been finding out to my detriment these last 24 hours. He is showing a cunning and a subtlety worthy of your smartest Slytherin. James Potter is dead, he cannot hear you no matter how much you belittle his son."

"A trap you forced me into, I told you it was pointless to try and teach him anything. Thank goodness I won't have to put up with him in my Potions class these next 2 years."

"That will not be an issue. Harry's terms were that you resign as a Hogwarts Professor, and that you never set foot in the castle again."

Snape looked astonished, he had thought at worst he would have to apologize, or give Gryffindor some points. One look at Dumbledore told him that this was no joke, there was no twinkle in those eyes.

"You agreed to this didn't you?"

"I did Severus. I had no choice really. I knew that if I refused Harry would make this public, there is no way you would survive the firestorm of the parents' reaction.....plus you would go to Azkaban. I can't have that, not for you, not for the Order. This way we can keep on fighting. There is no other way. I see that you are surprised that his terms are so harsh, I'm surprised that they were so mild. You've done an excellent job making him hate you, which I'm sure has eased your conscience. Your resignation wasn't the only concession I had to

make with him, but the rest are manageable.....in fact when he restarts his club he intends to get your Slytherins more involved.

"I'm sure that he'll get some too, Malfoy and his goon squad went beyond the pale, even for him He turned a lot people in our house off, I know that. You're really going to let him get rid of me?"

"I don't see any other option. Harry isn't doing this on his own, he has Peter Tyson and Bill Weasley advising him."

With that Severus knew he was defeated, he wasn't simply dealing with the vengeance instinct of a child, however powerful that child might be. This was different, Snape had no love for either Tyson or Bill Weasley, but he had tremendous respect for their intellects.....so much so that the votes for Head Boy in both their cases had been unanimous. At least there was no Azkaban, he wondered if Dumbledore would have agreed to that.....no, the old man needed him too much, he simply would have conceded other areas until Potter was running the school in everything but name only.

"Fine, I suppose I agree. I'm well shot of those brats anyway. What will I do for a living now?"

"You'll be employed by the Order, and receive the same compensation you did as a teacher. Once the war is over I'm sure Mr. Potter will agree to your reinstatement if you still want it. He specifically said that he had no issue with your spying, surprise surprise, so your status in the Order is no different than before, you will just be operating outside of Hogwarts."

Snape nodded, this made the most sense.

"One more thing Severus.....you must steer clear of young Mr. Potter for the time being. When the war is over and Voldemort is defeated.....well you two can settle your differences however you wish. Until that time though you are to leave him alone, I'm sure he has no wish to see you either."

"If you insist.....but when the war is over, and he and I both survive.....I will deal with him Albus, he will pay for this."

"You do what you have to do Severus.....after the war is won. Now I'm sorry that you have spend 36 more hours in here, but it can't be helped. Take the time to rest, reflect, and make your plans. I'll be here Monday for your release. You can come live at Headquarters until we sort you out."

With Snape's nod of acquiescence he took out a piece of parchment: Snape's resignation, a short letter that did not state any reasons for his departure. Snape signed it reluctantly. Dumbledore then took his leave, Snape was led back to his cell to continue his lost weekend.

Monday July 30, 1996

Ministry of Magic, Department of Youth Matters

Edwina Portle, Director

9:00 am

Harry and Luna walked hand in hand into the office. The previous day had been leisurely and restful, particularly after Friday and Saturday. Harry had procured a large sample of WWW products and the two of them spent a fun day testing them out on each other. They were saving their trunk decorating spree for after today's events, having concentrated on Ron's trunk on Saturday....plus there was a birthday party to plan, Harry's first real birthday party. He was really looking forward to this, all of his friends there and a nice, fun time. He and Luna had been poring over guest lists and Hedwig had gotten quite the workout.

Peter was already there in the outer-office, chatting with Portle's assistant.

"Hello there you two, have a good weekend?"

"We did, Luna and I played with some new WWW stuff yesterday, I've never been turned into so many colors." They all smiled, as Harry handed some of the products to Peter.

"Thanks, though I'd better keep this out of reach of my girls. We're just waiting on Dumbledore, though that's more out of courtesy than anything."

As if his ears were burning, Dumbledore strode into the office, robes billowing behind him in a strange imitation of Snape, the only difference being white robes instead of black. He greeted all of them amiably enough, but Harry could easily tell that the man didn't want to be there. Harry was hard put not to take a jab at him for bringing this upon himself.....but he was all to aware that he had committed himself to two more years at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore's authority. He still felt that some kind of backlash was coming at him from the old man, not merely for what he did to Snape, but for somewhat humiliating the old guy in front of the Order. Not that Harry was sorry for it, he felt it was long past the time when Dumbledore should be taken down a peg, the man had been moving people around like chess pieces for far too long. Peter took note of the chilly tone in the air.

"Let's go in shall we? Madam Portle is waiting for us." They knocked at the door, and after being bidden to enter, walked into Edwina Portle's office. Madam Portle was a brown haired witch in her mid-40's, with a kindly face which smiled at them. Harry figured that she must deal with Dumbledore quite a lot, and the thought pushed forward in his mind that perhaps Dumbledore had gotten to her ahead of time. Harry knew that he was about to find out how high a price the old fellow placed on his boy Snape's freedom. Portle began:

"Well gentleman, we all know why we're here. Mr. Potter, on your behalf Mr. Tyson has filed a petition to have you legally declared an adult. This petition has been signed off on by both you and your current guardians, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, your maternal aunt and uncle. Mr. Potter, I would like you to explain to me why you filed this petition. I know it says why in the document, and Mr. Tyson is quite an excellent writer, but I want to hear it from you."

"Madam Portle, the main reason I wish to become a legal adult is because my relatives and I can no longer...what's the word I'm looking for?.....we can no longer tolerate each other. My aunt and uncle are not magical, and in fact are opposed to any form of magic

being around them. They are not shy in voicing this opinion over and over in front of me. Except for 5 years I've spent at Hogwarts I've been living with them for 15 years and I can count on one hand the times they've been nice to me, truly nice like you would be to your family. They have regarded me as an unwelcome guest in their home, one forced on them by Professor Dumbledore here. The Professor felt that the blood protection provided by my aunt would keep me safe, which in point of fact it has. It did not, however, keep me safe from my relatives, where I spent a childhood of being my cousin's punching bag, my uncle's excuse for everything that went wrong in his life or the world, and my aunt's constant reminder of a sister she despised for being a witch, for being abnormal in her mind. This decision to place me there, mind you, was not one he was legally allowed to make. I know for a fact that my godfather, the late and very innocent Sirius Black, tried to take custody of me, but was rebuffed.....directly leading to his decision to confront Peter Pettigrew and the resulting death of many muggles”

“At each of the last two school years I've watched someone I cared about die right in front of me, but Professor Dumbledore has sent me right back to those people without even trying to let me grieve properly. He keeps saying its for my ‘protection’, but my sanity in that house is on the verge of snapping, I just can't deal with them any more. To his credit, Professor Dumbledore has been forced to acknowledge that I am right, and is here in support of my petition. Now Madam, I won't lie to you and say that the chance for a couple of months extra spell practice isn't a nice benefit. After all, I have every dark wizard in the country wanting to harm me, and likely a price on my head to boot. I will say Madam, that if my home life, such as it is, were fine, I wouldn't be here making this petition.”

“Albus, do you have anything to say here today?”

Dumbledore eyed Harry for a second as he wondered what would happen if he said what he really thought. However, irritated as he was at being manipulated like this, he realized that Harry had him over a barrel. He looked at Portle in a resigned way:

“I have nothing to add, I do not oppose this petition.”

"Mr. Potter, before I grant your petition, what living arrangements have you made for yourself?"

"Right now ma'am, I'm living in a room at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, business run by my close friends, Fred and George Weasley, in which I'm a partner....I gave them my winnings from the Tri-Wizard Tournament.....I'll live there until its time to leave for Hogwarts, its quite comfortable. During Winter Holiday I'll come back to London and find a house to rent or buy, that's where I'll live next summer."

"Well Mr. Potter, I have heard no reason why your petition should not be granted. The fact that during 10 of next 12 months you will be at Hogwarts anyway is certainly influencing my decision. Albus, you did not refute the young man's testimony here, so I must take it as fact.....given that, I must say how incredibly disappointed I am in your decision to put Mr. Potter in the hands of muggles who hate our kind. Never mind that he is 'The Boy Who Lived', any magical child would be disserved in that kind of environment. We've all heard rumors of these Dursleys, I am shocked to hear how understated they were. I'll be taking this matter up with the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which as you know I am a member of. Mr. Potter, you are hereby granted adult status in our world. Given that you have ties to the muggle world as well, you are still a minor there, as I have no jurisdiction in muggle matters.....though I'm sure Mr. Tyson here will take care of your status there soon enough."

With that, Portle signed a document on her desk and did a duplicating charm on it, making copies for herself, the archives, Dumbledore, and Harry.

"Madam Portle, thank you very much. I will do my best to make sure you don't regret this decision."

"I know you will Mr. Potter, you look after yourself now.....no pun intended."

They all laughed, even Dumbledore managed a smile. They shook hands with Madam Portle and exited her office.

"Well Harry, I believe I have kept up my end of the bargain. Now you need to honor yours."

"Quite right you are Professor....except there's just one more thing I want from you, it will be very easy to grant, but I'll need your word on it, or no freedom for your friend."

Dumbledore was slowly but surely losing the grip on his temper, but managed to ask Harry what else he wanted.

"I want your word, in front of Peter and Luna here, that there will be no reprisals from you or your teachers for what I have done these past few days. That means no extra scrutiny, no sending Hermione after me to phony up detentions or taking away points or anything like that. I want to be treated as an ordinary student. Nothing can be done to, or for, me that you wouldn't do for Dean Thomas, or Colin Creevey, or any other student. Agreed?"

"Fair enough Harry, I give you my word that there will be no reprisals.....but I want an assurance from you as well: If and when you get any visions you are to tell me about them as soon as humanly possible. If I am not available, you are to go Professor McGonagall. Agreed?"

"Agreed Professor, what you said makes perfect sense.....you have my word that I will do as you have requested."

They shook hands on it, the tired look on Dumbledore's face slowly receding. In the back of his mind he had been expecting Harry's request to be outlandish, a call for the expulsion of Draco Malfoy perhaps. The lad was doing this in a very calculated way, not moving any further than he had to in each instance, none fo the individual things he had demanded so far had been unreasonable in and of themselves.....only taken as a whole were they bothersome to Dumbledore. He wondered when Harry would start blackmailing him with his final weapon status, it was inevitable he felt, once Severus was out of jail. More than once this weekend Dumbledore had wished that Neville Longbottom, a nice, pliable child (however much confidence he had recently gained), had been the child of the Prophecy.

"How did your chat with Snape go?"

"I would say you made an enemy Harry, except for the fact that you already view Severus as an enemy. He consented to our deal, facing the reality of resignation versus 10 years in Azkaban, he agreed quite quickly. Here is a copy of his resignation, one is already on file with the Ministry."

"He brought it on himself sir, you know and I know....and surely as we're standing here Snape knows it, he just won't admit it in front of you. I'm sure he made some sort of 'as soon as the war is over I'll get him' speech to you, that's fine. Know this though Professor, once I deal with Voldemort....and I will deal with him, purely for my own reasons.....Snape can come at me all he wants, he doesn't scare me in the slightest anymore. Do you have someone in mind for the Potions job? I'm not going to be taking Potions, but admittedly I'm curious."

"Yes Harry, I have offered the job to a young man that I've had my eye on for quite some time. I haven't received his reply yet, but I imagine it will be favorable. He too was a Slytherin, and will likely take over Slytherin House."

"That's good, for your sake I hope he accepts. Have you spoken to Professor Flitwick about mentoring the DA?"

"Yes I did, and he accepted most enthusiastically. I believe if you were to send him an owl, he would like to meet with you to discuss your plans. Filius was quite flattered that you requested him, a most wise choice on your part."

"It was wasn't it?" Harry grinned, taking the immodesty out of the statement. "He's a terrific teacher, I know that he will have a lot to offer our group. I assure you sir, that I will have an open mind about the new Defense Professor and if she proves able I'll be sure to solicit her advice for the group."

Dumbledore nodded, he had to admit that it was nice of Harry not to be rubbing these victories in his face. The lad was being calm and

conciliatory.....though this was not likely to last through the next meeting, with Severus. The group walked over to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, once there they were ushered straight into Amelia Bones' office.

"Hello gentleman, here to discuss Snape are we?" "Upon seeing the nods of agreement, Madam Bones continued "Mr. Potter, Albus here assured me on Saturday that he had your agreement to drop the charges, does he?"

"Yes ma'am he does."

"And what kind of deal did you coerce out of him to get that agreement? I know of your dislike for our favorite Potions professor.....don't be surprised Mr. Potter, the Potter/Snape enmity is well known."

Harry simply handed over his copies of his emancipation, and of Snape's resignation. Bones read them with a creeping smile on her face.

"Quite ingenious of you young man, very well done. My niece will certainly be glad to hear about this, she likes Potions, but not its Professor. Albus, I assume you have releases from Mr. Potter's relatives, pursuant to dropping the other charges?"

"I do Amelia." He handed a piece of parchment to Madam Bones, she examined it closely.

"What kind of threats did you have to ply them with to get this parchment signed?"

"None Amelia, I bribed them." This was said simply and succinctly, and the air in the room was sucked in. Harry couldn't restrain himself and started laughing out loud, the sheer brazenness of it delighted him.

"You really are an 'ends justify the means' kind of person aren't you Professor? Whatever works I guess." Harry stopped laughing long enough to say that, and then sat back, still smiling.

"Well I know that you wouldn't have admitted that without having reached an accord with Harry here, so I will withhold official comment. His reaction is also quite telling. Before, however, I consider whether or not to drop the charges against Snape, I want to see what actually happened. Harry, if you will, I would like you to put your memory of that night into this pensieve so that I may view it. I will tell you that this memory will become evidence if I decide to press ahead with the trial."

"Yes ma'am, as long as I can have the memory back at some point."

"Of course."

"Is it possible for the room to view the memory, only Snape and I were there for the events, though I Peter and Luna heard them."

"Certainly, we can put a spell on the pensieve to act as a muggle type projector. Just use think of the memory and use your wand to place it in the pensieve."

Harry did so, in anticipation of this he had pushed the memory forward in his mind that morning. The streams of memory floated out of his head and into the pensieve bowl. He had seen this before from Dumbledore, but it was quite the trip to be doing it himself. Once in the pensieve, Bones performed the projecting spell on it, and the events played out for everyone in the room.

It only took five minutes, but seemed like an hour to Albus Dumbledore. Unlike Peter and Luna, as Harry has said, he had no idea of the specifics of what happened....he had assumed a certain amount of dramatic license on Harry's part, but this was much worse. He watched as Snape threw insult after insult Harry's way, and then finally tried to subdue him. In spite of himself he was impressed with Harry's reflexes, Snape clearly was doing his best to stun him, but failed. He saw Travis Biller's entrance into the situation, and its aftermath. He was vaguely disgusted with Snape's bragging about him being freed that night via Dumbledore's help, this explained his own reception in Auror Command when he had visited Snape. The

memory terminated at Biller's departure, Albus knew the next series of events anyway.

Bones mulled this over for a few moments, she had seen the last half of this already, from Biller's own pensieve memory. The attack had happened exactly as Biller had described, and matched the photographs that Sarah Westbrook had taken of the curse marks. Her first instinct was to press the charges anyway, she had no more love for the greasy potions master than the next person, and what he had done was horrible. What's more she knew she'd get a conviction, no one in their right mind would let him off with this kind of evidence. What was further amazing was Potter's refusal to draw his wand, a drawing of which must be the dream of every Hogwarts student of the last 10 years at least, but he held back. Biller had told her of his private theory that Snape was set up, but that he was either stupid, egotistical, or both and fell into the trap. Harry's non-use of his wand bore that theory out considerably. That would present a problem at trial in itself.....but it wouldn't be insurmountable, given the general distaste for Snape. The real issue was, was there a necessity to drag Hogwarts dirty laundry out in front of the Wizengamot? Dumbledore's own performance, which had been getting increased criticism over the years already, would again be called into question. Fudge would seize on it and try to oust him again, she couldn't afford to let that happen.

"Ok, I'm willing to grant the requests to have the charges against Severus Snape dismissed. However Albus, if that man even puts one toe wrong again, he's finished. I'll re-introduce these charges, whatever deal you've struck with Mr. Potter here. Off the record Albus, you've allowed one hell of a mess to be fashioned here. Your loyalty to Snape is admirable, but has made you disgustingly blind to his excesses, how many complaints have you gotten over the years about him? Have you ever done anything to rein him in? Add this to your Defense catastrophes.....this will be brought up at the next Board of Governors meeting, all I can tell you is that this year had better go much smoother than the past few, for the sake of your job."

"I understand Amelia, I will make sure that our next Potions teacher doesn't make the same mistakes."

"You do that Albus. Now Mr. Potter, you may take back your pensieve memory, but I must ask you not to discard it in the future, we may need it again, are we clear?"

"Yes ma'am, whatever you say. May I ask a small favor of you?" She nodded, and he took out a piece of paper. "Would you please give this to Susan the next time you see her? I would like to get some ideas from her about the defense group I'm running, I'm hoping she'll be more involved this year with it, in a leadership role."

"Of course.....this wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the fact that her aunt is the Head of the DMLE would it?"

"Not really ma'am, I want to establish bridges into the other Houses and Susan strikes me as a good choice to help me do that. Plus, and forgive me for saying this (he looked at Luna and grinned), but Luna and I kind of have a mind to set her up with our friend Ron Weasley and we'd like to sound her out about that too."

This wasn't what Madam Bones had been expecting hear at all, but she smiled all the same, Potter was still a teenager in a few ways wasn't he?

"Consider it done Mr. Potter, I'll give it to her this afternoon."

"Thank you Madam Bones." With that Harry took his pensieve memory back and they exited the office. Dumbledore said his goodbyes and went to go wait for Snape to be processed and released. Harry had no interest in seeing Snape again, so he let the old man go alone.

"Well Peter, our great plan is over. I think it turned out quite well considering, even if I am staying at Hogwarts.....not that there aren't great things there." He smiled at Luna as she squeezed his hand.

"Yes it did Harry, you should be proud of yourself. As soon as the news spreads you'll be an instant hero to ¾ of the school.....probably more than that, I doubt every Slytherin loves that git. Hopefully this is the last business we have to do for awhile, maybe this year will be peaceful for you."

"That would be nice, though I doubt it. You're coming tomorrow right? To the party?"

"Yes we will, thanks for the invitations, my wife and daughters are excited to meet you. We're looking forward to it. Now I'd better get back to the office, I have an appointment in 15 minutes. Harry, Luna, have a good day." Smiling at them, he walked back into Bones' office to use her floo.

Harry and Luna smiled at each other with relief, they held each other tightly for a few moments.....hopefully the worst was over.

Little Hangleton

Riddle Manor

3:00 pm

A nervous Severus Snape walked into Voldemort's house, he had felt his Dark Mark burn repeatedly over the weekend, but was unable to answer the summons due to his incarceration. He knew that he was in for it unless he could talk his way free, but he doubted it. He brushed past Pettigrew and strode into Voldemort's den. The only people in the room were himself, Voldemort, and Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Greetings my Master."

"Severus, I take it our little plan did not go well as you'd hoped?"

"No Master, it did not. I was unable to retrieve the Prophecy from Potter's mind before his help arrived."

"So you failed." This was said flatly and without emotion, Snape was astonished that he hadn't been cursed yet.

"No Master, I did not fail completely. In order to free me Dumbledore had to allow Potter certain freedoms, he will be much easier to capture. The old fool really does think that I'm spying for him, he has no idea what is going on, he's played right into our hands. We've split

them finally my Master, we can turn Potter and Dumbledore on each other, all we need do is wait for one to destroy the other. We will have our revenge my Lord."

End Chapter

Author's Note: Next up, the birthday party and the rest of the summer in Chapter 14

"Yes we will have our revenge Severus, though I must admit this is not going to be as easy as I thought. Malfoy and his gang of bunglers cost us dearly at the Department of Mysteries."

"Is that why you have not tried to free them?"

"No, not at all. At this point and time we simply don't have the manpower to overwhelm Azkaban, and thus far the Dementors are not responding favorably to my overtures. They want to be free to wreak total destruction and suck souls to their hearts' content....if they even have hearts. I cannot go that far Snape, I want to rule Britain, not destroy it. Right now the Dementors are best where they are, where they cannot harm either side."

This speech surprised Snape greatly, the disaster of June must have given Voldemort pause, and caused him re-evaluate his strategy. Snape had only seen Voldemort once since the incident, for a brief few minutes to finalize their plans.....plans that had been hatching since the beginning of the year.

"My Lord, if I may ask you, why don't you just seek Potter out directly and kill him now? Why wait until he has been better trained?"

"I want to see how this breach between Potter and Dumbledore develops, we must do everything we can to widen it. You must foment this while at Hogwarts this year."

"That will be a problem my Lord.....I have been forced to resign as Potions Professor, it was one of the conditions Potter set to not press charges against me."

Without warning Snape was down on the ground being Crucio-ed.....he hadn't even heard the spell being spoken or seen Voldemort's wand being drawn. He was held under it for about 10 seconds before it stopped, he laid on the ground panting for another couple of minutes before he had the energy to speak.

"I apologize my Lord, I know I failed you in that."

"Yes you did Snape, I was willing to forgive you for not getting the Prophecy information.....and by the way, how did you not even manage to hit the boy with a spell.....but I need you at Hogwarts. I gather there was no way you could talk the old fool out of this?"

"No Master, he said if Potter made this public it wouldn't matter what kind of deal they struck. I think he feels that his job is more in jeopardy than in the past."

"Tell me Snape, let's say that we can help push Dumbledore out the door at Hogwarts.....who do you feel would get his job?"

"Probably they would turn to McGonagall, as they did a few years ago when Lucius got him suspended."

"Would she be better for us than Dumbledore?"

Snape pondered this for a moment, an interesting problem.

"I would say that there are pros and cons Master: On the one hand, while McGonagall is well respected, she does not come close to commanding the fanatic loyalty that Dumbledore inspires. Even many of my Slytherins feel that way about him, he does try to make himself as popular as possible, leaving the House Heads to do the dirty work of discipline; On the other hand, keeping Dumbledore there might widen the rift between him and Potter. Potter's new found streak of independence will probably clash more with Dumbledore than McGonagall, since she is less likely to catch him at his various exploits."

"You seem to be in favor of getting rid of him then."

"Yes Master....with the caveat that it be for overall incompetence rather than a specific incident, as it was four years ago. Lucius was a bit too heavy-handed in his use of threats also, more subtlety is needed. If it just one incident he can galvanize support to him as he did before. Dumbledore and Fudge have reached an understanding, and there will be no more interference."

"There is to be a meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors in a couple of weeks, I'm sure after Umbridge and her fun there will be a more focused interest in Hogwarts by the Governors. Your dismissal and yet another Defense teacher will be the main topics I imagine. We must get to someone inside the Board and at least find out what they will be talking about."

"To what end my Lord?"

"We need to undermine Dumbledore as a prelude to taking him out.....out by his dismissal, not his death. We don't need to make any martyrs Snape. Most of our world has no stomach for this fight, we have to keep it that way. I want you to meet with Fudge, ostensibly to find a job with the ministry dealing with potions, but in reality I want you to sound him out. See what lengths he is going to for the war so far, and how he feels about both Dumbledore and Potter. Drop some quiet hints about their breach while you're there, see who he sides with."

"You want Potter to win this breach don't you Master?"

"Yes Snape, I do. I believe that he still might be willing to turn to our side.

Snape's mouth dropped open as he heard that, and didn't close for some time.

Tuesday, July 31, 1996

Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes

5:30 pm

Harry walked into his room in the back of the shop, a bit tuckered out from helping Fred and George in the shop for the afternoon.....a busy afternoon once word got out that Harry Potter was behind the counter. Once the crowd started coming and asking for autographs, Harry looked over at the twins who just shrugged as if to say 'hey, we didn't do this'. Harry decided that the twins deserved some payback for all of their help, so he began telling the crowd about his favorite WWW

products.....the stampede to get those items almost crushed a few people. All in all, it was the most successful afternoon in the brief history of WWW. The twins confided in Harry that with a couple more afternoons like this, the business would easily be able to survive the school year, when most of their target customers would be hundreds of kilometers away at Hogwarts. They had a mail-order system setup, but weren't sure about its viability long-term.

The trunk system had been a wild success so far, the kids had spent the previous night flooding in and out of each others' trunks. Only Ron had decorated his trunk so far, so they had spent the evening hanging out in his living room. He told them that Hermione was still living at Headquarters, but refused to speak to him and Ginny.....though she was politely civil to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Remus. The big debate that night had revolved around whether to invite her to the party or not. Ron and Ginny were against it, as the first meeting of the leadership of the new and improved DA was to be held, the invitations being sent to certain people in other houses that they wanted to recruit. Neville and Luna argued that not being invited would be the final insult to Hermione and would ruin any chance they had to bridge the ever widening gap. Harry remained largely silent during the debate, he knew that it was his party and the decision would ultimately lie with him. He frankly agreed with both sides: he didn't want to burn all the bridges to Hermione, but also didn't want her in the DA leadership at all. The problem, if she even showed up, was how to get rid of her before the seemingly impromptu DA meeting. They solved this conundrum by deciding that if she did come to the party, they would have Fred and George distract her while they went off to one of the trunks to have their meeting. Ginny had actually suggested that Dobby or Winky get Hermione to talk to them about SPEW while they had the meeting.....but one look at the nauseated faces of the two house elves squashed that idea.

The party was being held in the basement of WWW, where most of the designing and making of the pranks happened. While Harry was busy distracting all of the customers, Lee and Ginny had been downstairs cleaning everything up and setting up chairs and sofas. Food was to be muggle style, a lot of pizza, fish and chips, and tacos, which Harry had taken a liking to. He continued his gesture to Winky by not having any butterbeer supplied, sticking with muggle soft

drinks and juices.....Harry was planning on laying a large supply of these things into his trunk before the school year started. He walked over to the twins' room and hopped in their shower, being an icon while selling pranks was sweaty work.

After he got out, he ran into the twins, who had just closed the shop and were coming in for their own showers (plural, they don't do quite everything together). Harry stopped Fred before he went into the loo and sat them both down.

"I have a project for you guys, sort of an addition to the business, and something for you to do while we're all at school."

The twins looked at each other and smiled, they knew this was going to be good, since Harry had a sneaky grin on his face.

"Lay it on us, we're all ears."

"I want you to imitate your dad in a way."

"Huh?"

"I would like you to start experimenting with how to make muggle electricity to work in a magic heavy environment." He walked over to his room and motioned them to follow him. They saw 2 boxes in the corner.

"This is a muggle television and a video cassette recorder. Do you know what they do?" Seeing the twins nod he continued "I want to find out if there's a way that things like these can be used at Hogwarts, or even just here in Diagon Alley.....though Hogwarts is the goal. I think muggle entertainment could be a big seller if we could harness the power needed for it.....and I have some other uses for them in mind. Do you think that this might be doable?"

The two considered this for a moment. Of all the Weasleys, Gred and Forge were the most knowledgeable about the muggle world, having made a few forays into muggle London over the last few months. They had learned enough to know that the muggle entertainment industry was huge, and quite profitable. They knew this would require

quite a bit of research and study, not their usual bag, but this was different, since there were galleons involved. The twins treasured the irony that they were destined to be the least educated of their family, yet likely the wealthiest.....a distinction right now that belonged to Bill, until the business really got going. Fred spoke up after some thought.

"I love the idea Harry, but we're going to need more items to test with than just these two. How much money do you think this is going to cost?"

"Sometime this week the three of us will go over the Harrods, the muggle department store. We'll look over the right departments and check prices of the things we want to try to adapt. We should focus on music and movies at the start I think, then once we've got the process nailed, we go on to others. The television and recorder only cost me 85 galleons yesterday, I'll sink a couple thousand galleons into it to get us started. I think there's potentially a large reward, for very acceptable risks."

"How long do we have to deliver on this?"

"Until you get it right, and easily reproducible. There's no specific time frame on this, this is not for the war necessarily, I'm just planning for the aftermath when I'll need something to do. Guys, I gave you that money as a gift, but you went ahead and made me a partner anyway, I figure I should be pulling my weight."

Fred went over and shut the door, looking around outside it before he spoke up:

"You pulled your weight this afternoon mate, don't you worry bout that. Are you wanting to expand the business so we can bring Ron into it? He must have told you about our little talk."

"That isn't a factor Fred, its just a nice bonus if we can pull it off. The idea stands on its own, but we have to admit that the way things stand, Ron isn't going to have a lot of options after Hogwarts. I know he's said that he'll be studying a lot more, especially with taking the minimum number of classes.....but I'll believe it when I see it. I'm not saying that we should bring him in as a partner mind you, not at

all....but it would be nice to have a fall back for him if nothing else seems to be working out for him." George sighed, he saw the truth in that.

"Fair enough Harry, of course we'll do the experiments, it's a great idea that we should have thought of before you did. Ron and Ginny both will have jobs with us as long as they need to, and as long as the business can support 5 people, Lee is with us to the end as well. Just promise us one thing: that you won't tell either of them that they can fall back on this, we want them to at least try to find something that they can plant their own flag in. Its not like we don't want them around, but while I like ordering around those two to a point, its not something I would prefer to do for life. But like I said, they're family and they are the siblings that we're closest too, they can count on us."

"I won't tell them guys, don't worry. I want them to find out what their own talents are as well. This is going to be good though, I have a feeling that WWW will do very well if this can work. We'll figure out our Harrods trip tomorrow, maybe at night when the shop isn't open and Lee can come with us as well."

"Sounds good." With that, the twins went off to their room to get ready for the party. Harry went to get Lee, who was going to help him fetch the food. They walked over to the Leaky Cauldron and through it to Charing Cross Road, which had all of the muggle restaurants they wanted the food from. They started off at the Pizza Hut, and continued to the fish and chips store, a Mexican restaurant, and on a plea from Lee, a McDonalds. They placed their orders at each in turn, then doubled back to pick up the food (the drinks having been gotten that morning). After each stop, Lee and Harry would duck behind the building and call out for Dobby and Winky, who would take the food back to WWW. They ordered much more food than they thought they might need, but decided that having a lot of choice would be best. This day had been the first time that Harry had really spent with Lee alone, and the two quickly struck the same kind of friendship that Harry had with Gred and Forge.

Not for the first time, Harry felt that the easiest friendships he'd ever had were with Fred and George: there was no drama, no punches to

be pulled, no tongues to be bitten. He reflected that it was because the twins basically took him at face value; when they had met him they freely acknowledged his fame, accepted it, and moved on. This had never really changed over the years, and seemed to apply to Bill and Charlie as well. Percy was Percy, he had still not healed his breach with the family, and Harry oftentimes forgot he existed. Ginny seemed much more relaxed around him, her relationships with Michael Corner and Dean Thomas had finally gotten that star-struck look out of her eyes whenever she was around him. Harry had been dreading for years now the talk he figured he was going to be forced into with Ginny, about how there was never going to be any kind of romance between them. It wasn't that Harry wasn't attracted to her, he was, both physically and intellectually (once he'd gotten to know her). He was just too close to the Weasleys as a whole, and felt that his life had more than enough drama in it already without dating the only daughter of his surrogate family. It turned out that she was ecstatic that he was dating Luna, the two of them had quietly been giggling together the previous night in the trunk, Harry had a bad feeling that his snogging skills were being discussed.

Harry and Lee returned to the shop and got ready for the party, it was due to start at 7pm. The guest list was heavy on current students and recent graduates of Hogwarts. Peter and his family had been invited, as had Bill, Remus and the Weasley parents (Charlie had returned to Romania on Sunday), but they were the only older people that were due to come. Harry hadn't really wanted the latter three at the party, he was still very ambivalent about Remus, and Mrs. Weasley would likely try to put a damper on some of the fun, but he decided that the insult in not inviting them was worse than the discomfort their presence would give him. Tonks was specifically excluded by Harry, over Ron and Ginny's objections, due to her siding with Dumbledore at the Friday Night Comeuppance, as Harry had taken to calling it. She was a lot of fun to be around, but she had chosen her side, and it wasn't his. The invitations had specifically said no presents were to be brought, Harry and Luna had invited a more than a few people that he didn't know very well, and they didn't want them thinking that he was making a grab for a ton of presents. All that was requested was their company for an evening, that was gift enough.

As 7pm approached, guests began to arrive. Dobby and Winky had set up a couple of buffet tables on one side of the rather large room, filled with food and drink in a serve yourself kind of mode. Ron and Ginny arrived first, they said their parents would stop in briefly a bit later. Bill came with them, along with his girlfriend Ashley, an American witch who was also working for Gringotts. When Harry asked if Hermione was coming they all shrugged, the silent treatment was apparently still in effect. Peter and his family (wife Jennifer, and daughters Erin and Erica) came through the front door of the shop, the girls not being quite ready for floo travel yet. Dean and Seamus arrived along with Lavender and the Patil sisters, Dean made right for Ginny, much to Ron's discomfort. He had never actually said that he didn't like the two of them dating, but all in all he much preferred not knowing that Ginny was dating someone at all, ignorance was bliss. By quarter after 7 the room was full of chattering teenagers. The crowd included most of the DA from the previous year, all except Hermione and Marietta Edgecomb. Cho was there, having come with Michael Corner. She had raised her eyebrows when she saw Harry and Luna together, but had wished him a warm Happy Birthday nonetheless.

More than one person had noticed the eclectic company, Harry wasn't known for having too many friends outside of Gryffindor. Hermione's absence was commented on more than once, as Harry moved around from group to group, spending time with as many of his guests as he could. He saw Ron spending time with Cho and Michael, he liked Corner much better now that he wasn't dating his sister. Luna and Ginny were huddled with Susan Bones, Ron was pointed at more than once by the girls. Harry wondered if he should warn Ron about the matchmaking, but decided that he was better off staying out of it if could get away with that. Harry also spent some time with Peter and his family, he made much of the twins, Erica and Erin, and soon had them giggling. Peter's wife, Jennifer, inquired if he was still interested in hearing about the American Wizarding schools, she had written to her cousins and gotten a lot of good information for him if he wanted it. Harry replied that he hadn't shut the door yet on moving over there, perhaps for seventh year. They made plans to have lunch and talk about it next week. The Tysons only stayed about an hour, due to the girls needing to get to bed. Likewise Remus and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley only made brief appearances, Bill having

apparently talked to them about the need for the youngsters to have a night of fun without being watched. He assured them that he would make sure nothing untoward happened, though in fact he was only going to be watching for any fights that might break out....whoever wanted to go snog, it was their own business.

At about 10 pm Harry got up and called for everyone's attention. He did it using the Sonorus charm, making most of the guests look up to see if there was a Ministry owl coming to get him. He grinned at that, but didn't immediately snuff out that impression. The Weasleys as a group cried 'speech speech' and everyone laughed as Harry took the charm off his throat:

"I would like to thank you all for coming to this party, celebrating the fact I've survived 16 years. Now, now, don't go frowning on me, I'm quite happy to have lasted this long and I'm glad you're here with me. We had a rough year last year, but we stuck together and muddled through it as a unit, something that doesn't happen very often in Hogwarts. Now the reason we're all here is twofold: first, I genuinely wanted to spend time with you guys, you're all good company and its nice to be in a crowd of people my age again, I've missed that; second, with a couple of exceptions, we are the DA from last year and I want us to get a head start on our organization, now renamed the Defense Association."

"I have spoken to the Headmaster and he has agreed to officially sanction our group as an official school club. I will be the head, and the composition of the club will be up to me, there being certain people we don't want in it, spying on us (he deliberately didn't look at Cho when he said this, he would clarify to her later what he meant). We also will have a faculty advisor, Professor Flitwick was gracious enough to accept my invitation to do so. I'm going to meet with him before school starts and get a list of spells and curses that we will need to work into our program (the Ravenclaws all started grinning at this). The Headmaster assures me that his new Defense hire is going to be decent this time.....but we've heard that before haven't we? I am also very happy to tell you that Snape has been sacked."

Harry hadn't changed his tone of voice for the bomb that he dropped on the end there, and the room was quiet as they waited for him to

say that he was kidding. When he didn't a mass cheer let forth, even those who already knew screamed as loud as anyone. When the cheer died down half a dozen people all voiced the same question at once 'what happened?' Harry, with some help from Bill and the twins, told a heavily edited version of the last few weeks, that included his fight with Snape, and his emancipation, but not his previous plans to ditch Britain (he didn't think they would be willing to follow him if they thought there was a chance that he would abandon them if it got too tough) or the substance of the Prophecy, which he was willing to tell certain other people individually Harry also implied that he and Dumbledore weren't the best of friends, but not the extent of the breach.

"Now as far as I know there is an offer from Dumbledore out to a Potions teacher, who he also wants to take over Slytherin. Our Defense teacher is to be a former Auror who's been at Beauxbatons the last two years. Of course any duo would be better than Snape and Umbridge, and we're going to find out how much better. Ok....what do I want from you? When you return to school I want you to begin recruiting within your own houses, anyone third year and above who you feel can be trusted." Terry Boot spoke up:

"Trusted with what Harry? Aren't we going to be sanctioned this year? We don't have to hide anymore."

"Good point Terry, I'll tell you why. We are not alone at that school. By that I mean that while the light side of the war has the overwhelming majority of the students either on it or sympathetic to it, Voldemort has undoubtedly been recruiting as well. Some of our schoolmates might even have taken the Dark Mark, I don't know. We can't risk having him finding out exactly what we're doing. Oh he'll know that we've started the DA again, by the end of last year our group was certainly no secret, but we have to keep the specifics hidden. I'm afraid that there will be a parchment to sign again, with even more embarrassing consequences than last year, thanks to our personal charm setter, Mr. Bill Weasley. I need you all to sign it if you want to hear what's coming next." Everyone in the room signed the parchment, even the Hogwarts graduates, who Harry had privately assured would have a place in the club if they chose. After that was done, Cho couldn't resist any longer:

"Harry, where's Hermione Granger? This whole thing last year was her idea to begin with, yet she's not here."

Everyone in the room leaned forward to hear this. Harry looked at Ron and raised his eyebrows, seeing him nod he answered the question:

"Hermione was invited here tonight, even though the 'Gryffindor Trio' as I'm told we're called, is seemingly no longer. That said, even had she come tonight, she would not have been in the leadership of this group. It has not been lost on me how few of you actually like her, and I am not willing to have such a divisive person as a public face of our group. Like most of you, I don't enjoy being yelled at, and Hermione severely disapproved of my actions last Friday and Saturday, and has not been willing to talk with me about it. If she would like to join the DA, then she will be welcome, but I will reserve the right to remove her if she is causing disruptions or if I think she's informing on us to Dumbledore."

Lavender put in, "Won't Professor Flitwick be doing that anyway? Isn't that why they want a teacher to help us?"

"He'll be telling them some things, but not all. I don't intend to invite him to all of our meetings. We can keep some of our projects to ourselves by meeting at odd times.....times that I will set once the Quidditch practice schedule is set. Now, you've all noticed there are no Slytherins here, but I want some of them in the DA."

There was not the hue and cry that one might expect that last statement to cause. Most of the Gryffindors had been prepared for this by Harry and Ginny already, the Ravenclaws immediately saw the logic in this, while the Hufflepuffs just looked a bit concerned. Ernie MacMillan was typical of this:

"Surely you don't mean Malfoy and his gang do you?"

"Oh no, those goons will not be allowed anywhere near our organization. Like I told you, I have agreement from Dumbledore that I can exclude anyone I wish, though I did assure him that I would

reach out to Slytherin. I want people that are not suspect, heaven knows there must be some, even if they aren't our age and we have to go after the younger years. This is the one House that I'm willing to give a blanket waiver on the third year and up rule, if we can get some first and second years, more power to us. Over the next month I want each of you to come up with a list of five students that you feel comfortable bringing into the fold. We're going to make an open invitation for the first meeting, but I would like some people there from the get-go. If any of those five are Slytherins, more the better, but don't do any reaching that you're not comfortable with. Don't ask anyone that you feel would fail the parchment test, trust me, the consequences would be dire."

"Leadership is the final issue that we have to talk about tonight. I want two people from each of our Houses to be the coordinators, who will be the hubs in each house for recruiting new members and keeping us all informed of meetings and DA news. This will not be a power position, and will not automatically go to the Prefects.....in fact I chose people who mostly weren't Prefects, given the responsibilities they have already. For Gryffindor it will be Neville Longbottom and either Ron or Ginny Weasley, depending on whether or not she gets to be Prefect. Our letters will be sent to us next week, so we'll find out then. For Hufflepuff it will be Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones. For Ravenclaw, Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. Slytherin obviously will be led by people we choose later. These 6 are just the coordinators, there are few enough of us in the room total to make for a good executive council, and that will be where I go for big decisions and advice. Do any of the coordinators that I've mentioned wish to decline this position?" None of them said anything, they were all nodding their agreement.

"On that note, lets all go eat some more, the food had to be gotten rid of somehow. You can owl me here at WWW, where I'll be working for the next month if you have any questions, concerns, or if you just want to chat. Again, thanks for coming and making my birthday special, I'm proud to call all of you my friends."

Just then, Fred started a Happy Birthday song to Harry, and they all joined in as loud as they could. Harry thought it was a nice moment,

he told himself that he was wrong to have thought that he was alone at Hogwarts.

The large group broke up into smaller ones again, Harry sought out Cho and Michael.

“Cho, I want you to know that if you feel Marietta can pass the parchment, she can rejoin. I’ll hold no ill will toward her for last year if she wants to come back.”

This took Cho by surprise, she had figured the parchment this time was a direct slap at Marietta, and said so.

“No it wasn’t, though I can see why you might think that. That’s why I wanted to tell you like this. The new parchment curse is more for the Slytherins we bring in....and I’m sad to say its for Hermione as well, I won’t know how much we can trust her until I talk with her, and that’s a talk we’ve both been avoiding.”

“I’ll ask Marietta what she thinks, I don’t know if she would go for it or not, but I know she’ll be glad that you hold no ill will. She’s not proud of what happened Harry, she felt that she was caught between her schoolmates and her mom.”

“It was not an easy decision Cho, I know. Stress to her this though, we won’t forgive again. The next person, whoever it is, that betrays us will have a hard time living at Hogwarts. We all need that assurance, to keep this going.”

Cho and Michael nodded, they felt it was wise as well.

“Oh yeah, Michael. Can you and Ginny get along well enough here? Should I take steps to keep you two apart at our functions? She told me that there were no hard feelings on her part, and that she thought you would say the same.”

“She was right, we’re cool Harry. I know that you and Cho have your history, and you seem to get along just fine. Ginny and I can do the same, we’re all on the team together, I’ll fight for her just as hard as I would for anyone else.”

"That's great to hear Michael, we need all the unity we can get. Thanks for coming guys, I appreciate it."

Harry went over to rescue a nervous Ron, who was trying to make conversation with an equally nervous Susan Bones. Ron saw his friend approach and excused himself, but not before asking Susan if he could owl her sometime, which she smiled at and nodded. Harry raised his eyebrows at Ron (he had heard this last part) and Ron blushed a color that made his hair look very dull, but he smiled at the same time. They in turn descended on Katie Bell to talk Quidditch.

"Katie, I talked with McGonagall on Saturday and she said that this year's captain was going to be you or me, and that we could decide. What do you think? Do you want it? Since you've played more games than I have I think you should have first crack at it."

"I think I do want it Harry. I mean I've watched Oliver and Angelina and I know there are a lot of things I would do differently.....but yeah, it will be a lot of work, but I can handle it. I wouldn't argue though if you want it to."

"No, its decided, you're the captain. I can always get it next year, this way both you and I will have a chance to do it. Have you talked to Kirke and Sloper at all? Are they going to be doing it again?"

"They said at the end of the year that they were going to practice a lot more this summer, but I think I'll throw the positions open at the tryouts. We'll need two Chasers at least, and not everyone there might be suited for Chaser. Ron, is Ginny going to tryout for Chaser?"

"She said she will. We've been doing some practicing together and she's got a great throwing arm.. Just between the three of us, if there are two Chasers better I don't think you should pick her, but I feel pretty confident that she'll do well."

"Great, I'll have a chat with her when we get to school."

At about midnight the party began breaking up, goodbyes were said and the upstairs floo got another workout.

Harry spent the next two weeks working hard at WWW, the place was filled every day, particularly after the Hogwarts booklists came out and students by the dozen descended on Diagon Alley. After careful consideration Harry had decided to take a cue from Ron and sign up for fewer classes than the maximum. His courses were: Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, History, Creatures, and Herbology. He figured that he knew more about muggles than any Hogwarts teacher, and he would be busy enough with the DA and Quidditch. Ron had gotten into Potions, the new teacher had lowered the standard down to an 'E', though he made an exception for Neville. Neither Luna nor Ginny was made a Prefect, to the private relief of them both. Mrs. Weasley was initially disappointed for Ginny, but dropped the subject after Ginny told her that she wouldn't be happy as a Prefect. Luna knew that she wasn't popular enough in Ravenclaw to pull off being a Prefect, even with Harry's assurance that he'd cheerfully butcher anyone who touched her things again. Hermione moved back in with her parents while the birthday party was going on. Harry was tempted to owl her, but decided that he wasn't going to beg her to talk with him. He felt that a major fight with her was coming, and perhaps it was best that it would come at Hogwarts.

Within a week of the party, Harry received a message from Edwina Portle, requesting his presence at the next meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, to take place on August 16th. He assumed it was due to her comments at his emancipation meeting, and caused him a great deal of concern. He decided that a meeting with Remus was due. He owled him and suggested they have lunch together so they could finally have a talk, one that Remus had been writing to him about for a few weeks. Harry took a few hours off from his WWW work and met Remus in the Leaky Cauldron one Monday afternoon.

Monday, August 12th, 1996

The Leaky Cauldron

Noon

Remus Lupin and Harry Potter stared at each other across a quiet corner table, they had made small talk while they were waiting for their food, but the real reason for their chat was yet to be heard.

“So Harry, what’s on your mind?”

“Do I need a reason to see you Remus?”

“Of course not, but you seem to have been mad at me lately, my party invitation notwithstanding. I’ve been waiting for a list of grievances.”

“Don’t patronize me Remus, if I’m mad at you its for good reason. In point of fact I’m not mad, not really. I would like to ask you some questions though, if its not too much trouble.” Harry’s voice dripped with sarcasm as he stared down his old professor. Remus was uncomfortably aware that Harry had wand rights at this moment. He sighed, and wondered what kind of hell he was about to endure.

“Ask away Harry, I promise I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Why did I never hear of you until I was 13?”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t allow it Harry. His deal with Petunia was contingent on no contact with wizards of any kind until you turned 11.”

“You must be kidding. You people left me alone in that house for 10 years with just one squib to watch out for me? What on earth possessed you to agree to that?”

“He was very convincing Harry, he felt that you needed some time to be a normal child before you found out what was coming, before you found out how much a legend you were in our world. I wasn’t happy about it, I told him I could pretend to be a muggle relative of your father’s, but he told me that Petunia would never agree to it.”

“Bullshit Remus, that’s a lie and you know it. He told us at that meeting how he threatened Vernon and Petunia, he could have thrown in a few visits if he had wanted to. Did you even try to come see me? I don’t mean did you ask the old meddler if you could, I

mean did you physically come to Little Whinging to see me, to see if I was well taken care of?"

"No Harry, I'm sorry that I did not. I accepted Dumbledore's word that you were ok."

"Well I wasn't ok, was I Remus? And you wonder why I might be mad at you? You'd better pray that mom and dad aren't up there watching you, or you'll be in for a rude awakening when you get to heaven. You betrayed them Remus, maybe not as badly as Peter did, but you betrayed them."

Remus didn't know what to say to that, particularly because he agreed with it. The worst thing about it was that Harry wasn't yelling at him, the disgusted tone of voice was done in normal volume.

"Why now Harry? Its been three years since we met and over two since you found out I was friends with your parents. Why are we having this talk now and not then?"

"Because I've evaluating who I trust and who I don't trust Remus. Old relationships and friendships are evolving for me, notice what I've allowed to happen with Hermione. I was pleasantly surprised to see you cross the room that night, but you've always toed Dumbledore's line, and I don't want to trust anyone that blind. I'm here because I'm hoping your new found wealth will break you from that blindness. I don't mind people who are loyal to the old man, loyalty is to be prized. I do mind, however, people who blithely ignore what's right and wrong because he tells them that things 'must be that way'."

"I don't know what to tell you Harry, I think that I declared myself that night, and that was before I knew I was rich. I'm sorry that I neglected you when you were a child, I hope in time you can forgive me for it. You know as well as anyone that Dumbledore gets what he wants, because he looks at you with that twinkle in his eye and that soothing voice and you just trust him. I do agree with him that he thought he was doing what was best for you, but he didn't have anyone he was willing to listen to, to be a devil's advocate. That's his problem Harry, he's been in power so long, he just can't bring himself to take anyone else's advice. Oh he listens to McGonagall on a few things, and

Snape had more of an influence over him than any of us realized.....but he rules that school Harry, and by extension he rules our side. It may be with the proverbial velvet glove, but its an absolute rule nonetheless.”

“How has he been treating you and the Weasleys since that night?”

“On the surface its no different, but there’s been a subtle shift. Molly and Arthur have noticed it as well, even if there’s no way he could expect them to draw wands on their children. I don’t know for sure if we’ve been kept out of things, but its hard to tell.”

“What can you tell me about this Board of Governors meeting coming up Friday?”

“Nothing, this is the first I’ve heard of it. Why do you ask?”

“Because I’ve been invited to it. Both Edwina Portle and Amelia Bones mentioned that they would be bringing my situation up at the next Board meeting, and this must be it. I was wondering if Dumbledore had mentioned it at all.”

“If he has, it hasn’t been to me. What are you going to say there? Are you going go after him again?”

“I don’t know Remus, I’m not sure what to do there. I mean, how many times can I beat him before he starts to get ugly? I will certainly tell the truth at the meeting, I’m not about to lie to those people.....but the truth can always be slanted a certain way, and I’m not sure how far I can push Dumbledore.”

“Do you want him gone from Hogwarts?”

“Yes and no. Yes because I can handle McGonagall, I’m not saying she’s pliable, but she doesn’t think outside the box nearly as well as Dumbledore. No, because it would have the effect of starting a civil war on the light side, and that would play right into Voldemort’s hands. I think the best thing to do would be to have the old man watched a bit more carefully by the Board, something they should have been

doing all along anyway. Speaking of which, what happened with the Potions job?"

"The man that Dumbledore first asked wound up taking the job. His name is Charles Shepherd, he was in Charlie's year if I recall correctly from what Dumbledore told me. A brilliant guy, he's been doing private research since he graduated from Hogwarts. He was a Slytherin of course, but not one of the bad ones. Snape was non-committal about him, a good sign. The new Defense teacher will be Melissa Bliss, I talked to her last week when she stopped by Headquarters. She seems nice enough, she asked me for a rundown on which students were talented and which I thought needed the most work. I think you'll like her, but I wouldn't blame you for withholding judgment until you sit in on a few of her classes. Those are going to be the only new teachers, everyone else is coming back."

"Hagrid too?"

"Hagrid too, he came back Saturday from France, where he was visiting Madam Maxime.....don't ask, the idea makes me ill too."

They enjoyed a good laugh, and Harry decided not to push things any further than he already had with Remus. They talked of casual things for the rest of their lunch, but it didn't go unnoticed by either of them that Harry hadn't accepted Remus' apologies.

Friday, August 16th, 1996

Hogwarts, Formal Conference Room

10 am

"I would like to call this meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors to order! All those present, say Aye when your name is called."

"Millicent Bagnold" "Aye"

"Amelia Bones" "Aye"

"Brian Davies" "Aye"

"Edward Delaney-Podmore" "Aye"

"Magdalena Edgecombe" "Aye"

"Philip Greengrass" "Aye"

"Niall O'Hare" "Aye"

"Edwina Portle" "Aye"

"Alice Pye" "Aye"

"Gilbert Whimble" "Aye"

"Manuel Zabini" "Aye"

"And I am Emma Fogg, Chairperson, and I am present. We have two guests present, please identify yourselves."

"Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Harry Potter, 6th year student at Hogwarts."

"Welcome Mr. Potter, Albus. The first item on the agenda today is the resignation of Severus Snape, Potions instructor. Albus, we have all

heard various, and at times conflicting, reports on what happened. We would like you to enlighten us."

Dumbledore had known this was coming for over two weeks now, but was still unsure how much to tell the Board. He was aware that while his job wasn't in jeopardy, he was going to be questioned rather harshly by this panel. Harry's presence also gave him pause, how much residual anger did the lad have toward him? If he only told part of the truth, how far would Harry go to harm him? He decided on his course of action and looked up to address his audience:

"Of course Emma. Over the past few months I have had Severus give Harry Occlumency lessons, in an effort to help shield his mind from Voldemort's manipulations. Due to events during his student days at Hogwarts, Severus has built up a disdain for all things Potter, both for James and Harry. James, of course, is no longer with us, but the anger was transferred to young Harry here. In retrospect it was a mistake for me to have the two in such close proximity any more than I had to, but I was compelled to do so by outside events. Once the summer began I made plans to send Severus over to Harry's home to resume the lessons. Harry, through his guardians, sent us a letter stating his unwillingness to continue the lessons under those circumstances. I decided that it would be best for Harry if his wishes in this case were ignored, so I had Severus go to Harry's house anyway at the appointed time."

With that, Dumbledore gave the events of July 27th as he recalled them from Harry's pensieve memory, including the insults, the attack, and the subsequent arrest. He spoke of the deal he had struck with Harry, including all of its particulars.....all but the bribery of Harry's relatives to drop their charges. The Board, amazingly enough, didn't interrupt him once as he spoke for 15 minutes.

Harry sat there listening in total astonishment, he couldn't believe that Dumbledore was coming clean like this. Harry had been undergoing his own mental flip flopping about how much of the truth to tell, but he certainly wasn't expecting his hand to be forced like this. Harry had fully expected to have to mold his story to Dumbledore's version of the events, as he had decided not to further harm the old guy unless

his tale went completely beyond the bend. The idea of Dumbledore telling the bald truth had never really occurred to him.

"In conclusion, I acknowledge that I could have done much more to control Severus Snape's excesses. I was aware that he was the most disliked teacher in our school, but I allowed my respect for his talents and my gratitude for his service in the last war to cloud my judgment. I regret that I have not apologized to Harry as of yet for the actions of the 27th, and I would like to do so now. The new professor I have chosen for the Potions position is a much calmer young man, without many of the demons that made Severus so angry."

The room was quiet for a moment as they took all this in. Amelia Bones was as shocked as Harry was that Dumbledore had told such an unvarnished re-telling of the events, she had expected some kind of rationalization of what happened. She knew that there had been no sign of Snape since the incident, though she had heard a rumor around the office that he had an appointment lined up with Minister Fudge. She stared at Harry as he sat there with a slightly bemused expression on his face. She decided to see how the kid would respond to this:

"Harry, does this recollection gibe with your memory of the events?"

"Yes ma'am it does, Professor Dumbledore was very accurate."

"I should tell the Board that I witnessed Harry's pensieve memory of the attack, and I agree that Albus told it as accurately as possible. I agreed to drop the charges solely due to the fact that a resignation was part of the deal." Manuel Zabini, a 40 year old former Ravenclaw, with three children currently in Slytherin House, put in:

"Just who is this calmer man that you have chosen to replace Snape, and who will be the new Head of Slytherin?"

"His name is Charles Shepherd, he is 26 years old, a graduate of Hogwarts of course, in Slytherin House. I have had my eye on him ever since he left school, with a mind to hire him if something ever happened to Severus. Charles has family money, and thus has been able to devote his life to the study of his passion, Potions. He has

written many scholarly works on the subject, and just recently delivered one of the keynote papers at a Potions-Masters conference in Halifax, Canada. He is blessed with a quiet temperament and I have no doubt that the students will readily take to him. His one drawback is that he has never taught before, but I did an informal canvas of our current faculty, most of whom taught him while he was here, and they agree that he will be good for the students. I am also appointing him to be Head of his old House. I decided to do that, rather than appoint Professor Sinistra, after she expressed an unwillingness to take it unless I insisted. Since they would be the only two Slytherin alumni on the faculty, Charles was the only other option, and he accepted it without comment.”

“Did you even consider making a more thorough search? I seem to recall what happened the last time you hired someone so young for the Potions position (Snape was 24 when he assumed the position), and how much of a disaster its been. Was this perhaps a pre-emptive strike in anticipation of this meeting? Did you want your own man in place so that we could not influence the decision?”

“No Manuel, that was not a factor in my decision. I see Charles’ youth as a plus, not a minus. He is young enough to relate to the students, and his knowledge of Potions is on par with Severus’, a knowledge that even his most vociferous detractors cannot impugn (he looked sideways at Harry when he spoke this, but Harry didn’t give him the satisfaction of nodding his head in agreement). Charles has the potential to reach out to generations of students, and I might remind you of one Minerva McGonagall, 22 years old when she replaced me as Transfiguration Professor, or Lily Potter, 19 years old when she took over as Professor of Ancient Runes. Both of them can be considered successes, Minerva of course is now Deputy Headmistress and has touched the lives of most of our world.”

“How typical of you to evade the main thrust of the question Albus.....why was a more thorough search not made?”

“Because I felt that the best man available was obvious, and I took steps to hire him before one of the other schools got to him.” Alice Pye couldn’t resist this:

"Oh yes, we've seen what your idea of the best man available has been lately. One decent Defense hire in the last 5 years, and he turned out to be a werewolf that you've been hiding the secret of for the last 20 some odd years. Add that to Hagrid and his disdain for the safety of our children, Trelawney and her predictions of death everywhere you turn, and the ultimate bungle when you hired your friend Snape to terrorize a generation of children with his bias. The only good choice I can remember you making in the last 15 years was hiring Alexandra McDowell to teach Ancient Runes after the murder of Lily Potter. What on earth makes you think that we would just sign off on whomever you choose?"

"The hiring of teachers lies solely with me, according to Hogwarts by-laws. I will admit that I have not vetted our Defense teachers as well as I could have, I believe I have rectified this problem with our other new teacher this year. Last year I sent out many, many inquiries to those I was interested in to fill the Defense position. Included in those inquiries were notes to every current and most past Aurors, they all refused the position. I was given no choice but to accept Dolores Umbridge, and I agree that she was the worst teacher Hogwarts has seen in many years. This year's new Defense teacher is one of those former Aurors I just spoke of. Her name is Melissa Bliss, she is 28 years old, and a graduate of Hogwarts and the Ministry's own Auror Academy. After spending 6 years as an Auror, she accepted a position at Beauxbatons, where she has been for the last 2 years. I appealed to her Hogwarts pride, and she was gracious enough to take the job." Brain Davies spoke:

"Solely with you you say? As has been said, you've done a damn poor job using your own discretion in these hires. Hogwarts by-laws can be changed Albus, you've been allowed a free hand by this Board for quite some time and your results have not been positive. Your management of the Tri-Wizard Tournament got one student killed and another kidnapped; We have had two active Death Eaters as Professors, with another one whose loyalty can at best be described as suspect, and was only let go after he attacked a student. If Voldemort launched a full scale assault on the school one month from now, only the teachers....maybe....and Potter here and his cohorts could adequately defend themselves; the school and its children would be easy targets. The fact that this 16 year old boy is

more capable in Defense than most of your teachers is a disgrace, and you should be ashamed of yourself for it. I for one am not advocating your dismissal....yet. But your free hand has not been a success, and you must count on much closer scrutiny by us from this point onward."

This continued on for 30 more minutes, as every Board member took their chance to criticize Dumbledore, some milder than others, but all were critical in some way. Amelia Bones had glowing things to say about Melissa Bliss, her former subordinate, and that put something of a lid on questions of the new Defense Professor. The barely polite abuse heaped on Dumbledore reached such a degree that Edwina Portle decided not to bring up the placing of Harry Potter with those muggles. As irritated as she was by Dumbledore's actions over the years, she too did not want him replaced, and felt that bringing up Potter's relatives and that situation was possibly enough to get him sacked. Portle looked at Harry and decided that he did deserve an opportunity to air that grievance if he so chose:

"I would like to give Mr. Potter here a chance to speak, given that he has been involved in many of the events that have led to our concerns with Albus."

The entire room looked at Harry, and he had to quickly decide where his true loyalties lied. He didn't want Dumbledore sacked, not really, though he had enjoyed seeing the old man hectored at for the last 30 minutes.....it had been hard to keep the grin off his face at a few of the comments. Not so deep down he knew that if he was the straw that broke the camel's back and got the old fellow fired, he would be persona-non-grata with the rest of the faculty for the remainder of his time at school.

"I don't know if it's my place to comment on this, but if I'm to be honest I have to say that I agree with most of your criticisms. No man is perfect however, and Professor Dumbledore has admitted his mistakes and I feel he deserves a chance to rectify them. Yes, things could have been better, but Professor Dumbledore was often hamstrung by outside factors that not even he could control. As for Mr. Davies' feeling that the school is vulnerable to a Death Eater attack, well I don't know about that, but I can assure all of you that my

defense group will be very active, and one of our training goals will be the best possible defense of Hogwarts and its younger students."

Most of the Board members nodded at Harry's comments, many were relieved to learn that he was taking such an interest in the younger students and their safety. Emma Fogg had been silent for most of the meeting, only adding her agreement to a few of the complaints. She was interested in getting a handle on the pulse of the meeting, and once she had it, she spoke:

"I would like to propose a motion to amend the Hogwarts by-laws that allow the Headmaster total control over the hiring of the faculty. I propose that we amend the rule to state that a 2/3 vote of this Board can veto any proposed hire by the Headmaster. I am not making this proposed amendment retroactive, so the hiring of Charles Shepherd and Melissa Bliss will not be affected, but will take effect with the next vacancy. The current rule of course, is that a unanimous vote of the Board is necessary for such a veto, and I can tell you with little surprise that such a veto has never been consummated. Given what I feel is the thrust of the meeting so far, I believe this amendment is responsive to our desires. Is there anyone who wishes to oppose it?" She looked straight at Dumbledore when she said this.

Dumbledore in point of fact wanted to tell this Board what it could do with its amendments, and felt it would almost be worth getting fired to see the looks on their faces if he did so. He bit his tongue, a habit he was becoming more and more used to lately. He had been relieved somewhat when Harry was so easy on him, and a bit surprised when he declined to bring up the placing of him with the Dursleys.

"I have no objections to this amendment, perhaps it is for the best."

"May I ask a question?" Harry asked.

"Yes of course Harry, what would you like to know?"

"I was just curious as to if there was a motion to veto Snape's hiring. I know it may be none of my business, but given that he was sacked because of me....."

There were chuckles all around the room, and 67 year old Niall O'Hare responded:

"Harry, there was a motion to disqualify your favorite professor, based on his Death Eater past. There were 6 votes to disqualify him, 4 votes to approve him, and 2 abstentions. Under the proposed amendment, he still would have been hired, though that may have influenced the abstentions to declare themselves. I am somewhat ashamed to say that I was one of the 4 who voted to approve, Albus isn't the only old man willing to acknowledge a mistake."

"Thank you Mr. O'Hare."

"Is there anyone who would like to oppose this amendment?"

No one spoke, and Fogg wrote something down on the parchment in front of her.

"The amendment passes. Before we move on to details for the Hogwarts Express, are there any further motions?"

Magdalena Edgecomb looked at both Potter and Dumbledore with not-so-concealed contempt as she raised her hand.

"I am not comfortable with the amendment as it stands, I feel it does not go far enough. We have spent a great deal of time discussing and criticizing Dumbledore here, and I personally feel that his mistakes, lapses, and yes, even crimes, warrant stiffer punishment than we have talked about. I am making a motion to dismiss Albus Dumbledore as Headmaster of Hogwarts."

Murmurs filled the room as everyone stared at Edgecombe. It was common knowledge that her daughter had informed on Harry and the DA, a situation that had directly led to Dumbledore's replacement by Umbridge and near arrest. Rumor had it that the word 'sneak' was imprinted onto Marietta's forehead and didn't disappear until a battery of potions were utilized. Fogg herself didn't want Dumbledore gone either, and felt that she didn't dare risk a prolonged discussion on the matter.

"The motion is on the floor, and rather than hear a prolonged debate on the subject, which would merely be going over what we've already talked about, I would like to have the vote on this now. Before I do so, however, I would like to give Albus a chance to say a few words, since he has been largely silent during our discussion."

"Ladies and Gentleman, I have listened to your comments with interest, and I do not discount a one of them. I have made mistakes, both large and small, that I regret. Would it be disingenuous of me to say that I made most of them with the best intentions? The person I have most wronged is Mr. Potter here, and he has hardly called for my head, for which I am thankful. You as a group have given me your views, and all I ask is a chance to act on them. I will not beg for my job, but I would be less than forthright if I didn't say that I would like to keep it."

Nobody had anything to say to that simple speech, there were even a few guilty looks. Fogg knew that the motion was in no danger of passing, but she took the roll anyway, and only Edgecombe and Edward Delaney-Podmore voted in favor of it. The rest of the meeting dealt with routine matters, and to Harry's surprise he was allowed to stay and witness it. After the meeting broke up, he approached Edwina Portle.

"Thank you for not mentioning my Dursley situation to the Board, Madam Portle. I think that might have pushed everything further than I would have wanted."

"I agree Harry, though I would like you to keep it in your back pocket for the future. Just because we didn't bring it up now, doesn't mean we can't in the future."

"Are you suggesting that I blackmail him?" Harry was having a hard time believing this kindly woman would say that.

"In a manner of speaking. We both know that Albus hasn't just given up his interest in 'protecting' you. I watched him at that meeting in my office, and that taken with what Peter Tyson wrote in your petition.....well let's just say that he gave in rather easily. Now I understand that you had him by the shorts with Snape, but that is

over and done with now. Don't worry, Snape will never be approved by this panel to get his job back, even after you graduate. That said, you need some insurance in case Albus goes back on your deal, and this might be it."

"Thank you for taking an interest in this Madam Portle. I won't lie to you and say that I haven't considered just that. I would prefer not to have to, but Peter and I discussed the same thing: He gave in too easily."

"Harry, you are very important to Albus for some reason, a reason that involves more than simply being 'The Boy Who Lived' or the son of Lily and James, God rest their souls. I don't know this reason, and I'm not sure I want to even if you're willing to tell me.....but Harry, this obsession by him won't easily go away, I would be very cautious in my movements if I were you. Make sure that you always remember 'risk v. reward' whenever you deal with him. You've won quite handily so far this summer, but only because you've controlled the battlefield. Once you get to Hogwarts you'll be on his ground, always."

"Yes ma'am, I'll be careful.....in all respects."

"Good boy, even if technically you're not a boy any longer in a legal sense."

They said their goodbyes, and Harry left, pointedly ignoring Dumbledore. He headed for Flitwick's office, they were going to meet Neville at the Three Broomsticks for lunch and a chat about the DA.

Monday, August 19th, 1996

Diagon Alley

3:00pm

Mondays were generally slow days at WWW, so Harry took the opportunity to wander around Diagon Alley. He had been living in Diagon Alley now for three weeks and the shopkeepers and their employees had gotten used to his presence, no longer gawking at him as they had at first. Most of them merely said hello nowadays,

after all, they considered him one of them.....while Harry and the twins had not actually advertised his partnership in WWW, it was common knowledge around the Alley. He passed by Peter Tyson's office and smiled, thinking of his recent lunch with Jennifer. She had told him all she knew about the American wizarding schools, and Harry had it in the back of his mind to at least inquire about teaching over there once his Hogwarts days were over

Harry still hadn't decorated his trunk, he had gone on shopping trips over the last week with the other trunk owners and helped them do theirs. All he had done so far was put in a bed and some furniture for Dobby and Winky, who were the unofficial managers of the 6 trunk system. They flooed back and forth between them, keeping them clean and stocked. Harry had initially been concerned about this, he didn't want his elves doing the work for so many people. Dobby had screwed up his courage though, and informed Harry that he and Winky were more than a bit bored. There was only so much clothes making and painting that two elves could do. He said that while he and Winky were starting to appreciate the relaxed pace that life with Harry was giving them, they wanted to clean something and be active. Somewhat chastened, Harry told them to do it if it made them happy. They had also done a bit of cleanup and maintenance at WWW, with Fred's and George's enthusiastic consent. The twins and Harry saw no reason that this arrangement couldn't continue throughout the school year, given that the trunks provided a safe and reliable way of moving between WWW and Hogwarts; the elves certainly had no problem with it. All told, the work the elves were doing amounted to about half a day's work, and they seemed content with it.

One thing had been bothering him since his chat with Edwina Portle, and really it had been in the back of his mind ever since he had moved out of the Dursleys: Was Dumbledore keeping an eye on him even now? Fred and George had taken to performing scans at random times to see if there were any listening charms or other eavesdropping measures. One time, after chiding Harry for not learning that spell yet, Fred had confessed to Harry that it wasn't solely for him that they were doing it. He explained that there were certain experiments that they were doing that could be construed as dangerous or controversial. Even the electronics research, which was just getting started, might raise a few eyebrows. Harry, Lee, and the

twins had raided Harrods for 10 VCR's and 10 compact disc players, and the twins were tinkering with one of each. He wasn't sure if he would soon get over the sight of walking in on Fred and George studying two very thick electronics books, bought from the muggle bookstore across Charing Cross Road, these guys surely did take a few things seriously.

One trip Harry had been putting off since his Trunkenstein visit was a trip into Knockturn Alley. All of his inner circle were busy today: Luna was at The Quibbler helping her father, Ron was at WWW, Ginny with Dean off doing something, and Neville was at St. Mungo's visiting his parents. Harry had volunteered to go with Neville, after their fun lunch with Flitwick, but Neville had politely declined, he was somewhat uncomfortable sharing that part of his life. Harry fully understood this, he knew that if he was Neville he wouldn't want people gawking at his parents like that. In a way though Harry wasn't sorry that he was alone for this excursion, he figured that he would have a freedom of movement that he would not have had otherwise. He walked into the main entrance into Knockturn Alley, and once he satisfied himself that no gongs were going off, he set off. Harry figured that if anyone was currently following him, this would be the time to find out.

Harry immediately decided to skip Borgin and Burkes on this trip, the last thing he wanted was Borgin to know that he was interested in some of his items. He mentally cursed himself for not trying out a disguise, he would have to get some advice on the twins about that. He still had almost two weeks to go before catching the train to school, so there was plenty of time. He went further into the Alley than he had on the trunk expedition, and found a used bookstore that looked interesting. He went in, the place was small and empty of people, there wasn't even a clerk visible. He looked over the various sections, which dealt primarily with subjects that he studied in school. Surprisingly there was a decent sized muggle section, dealing with everything from movies to martial arts. Harry picked up a few of these books set them aside in a pile. He went over to the Curses section and his eyes got very greedy, there were some dangerous looking titles on display. There were no prices to be found on anything, and Harry felt in his pockets to see how much money he had. He found 40 galleons in his shrunken money bag, clearly Dobby would be making

a trip to Gringotts in the coming minutes. He picked and chose about 20 books, not caring if they were duplicate copies of his Grimmauld Place books, some of these were worth buying just to get them out of circulation. He had still not picked up his book inheritance yet, though Bill had put a number of wards around the library so that nothing could be destroyed or removed, the room couldn't even be entered without the right password, which only he and Bill knew. He had asked Bill to do it the day he had found out about them, he didn't trust Dumbledore or Remus not to go picking through the books to make sure he didn't see something, 'for his own good'. According to Ron, Remus had set off the wards one time and walked back into the kitchen looking a bit dizzy. There was enough room in his trunk for them, if he used two of the four rooms. Harry decided that after he left the Alley he would go get some bookshelves and get it done tomorrow, no sense in giving Remus any more time to get past the wards.

He proceeded to the Charms sections, picking out a few of the advanced books, the same with Transfiguration.....three of which dealt with becoming an Animagus. Harry wasn't sure he wanted to become one of those, he was still muggle enough that the thought of living as an animal, even for brief minutes, made his skin crawl. He decided to get the books anyway, life was all about options. Who knows, maybe one of his friends might make use of them. There apparently was no Defense section, the section on Curses must have covered all of that. He ignored Potions, if he never brewed another one again it wouldn't bother him, Snape had effectively cured that of him. Herbology likewise was passed over, he felt that he would learn enough about it from his school texts, or he would ask Neville. He debated on whether to buy a couple for Neville or not, but he didn't know if Neville had them or not, plus he had spent almost 3,000 galleons on Neville with the trunk and accessories lately, that was enough, he didn't want to look like he was financing a friendship.

He brought the books to the front in four piles, and again looked around for a clerk. He didn't see one, but did spot a fellow customer whose entrance he hadn't noticed during his browsing. The customer was a middle aged woman who was absently looking through the muggle section. He didn't recognize her, but something about the way she carried herself seemed familiar. Harry wasn't stupid, and the

word ‘Tonks’ immediately flew into his mind, but he didn’t think she was dumb enough to be so brazen. Before he could open his mouth to call for the clerk, an old man wandered in from the back. He stared at the piles of books that Harry had stacked up with an incredulous look on his face.

“You want to buy all of these? That’s quite a bit of money to be spending there boy.”

“How much money is quite a bit, old man?.”

The man chuckled, causing the other customer to flinch a little. Harry’s mental radar immediately went off, and he put up his mind shields, just in case.

“A lad with spine, didn’t know any existed anymore. You have what? 33 books here?” He counted them, indeed it was 33. He took a spare bit of parchment and began writing some numbers down.

“That’ll be 225 galleons there sonny, either cash or Gringott’s draft.”

Harry privately considered this to be a great deal, and called out for Dobby (he preferred Dobby for bank missions, as he wasn’t very easily intimidated). Dobby arrived to the amusement of the old clerk, who until Dobby spoke Harry’s name, had given no indication that he knew who his customer was. That was ended quickly, but the clerk didn’t bat an eye....and tellingly neither did the woman over in the muggle section, who had neither moved nor picked something out. Harry had a brief moment wondering what Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible would do here. Dobby popped over to the bank and retrieved the money, which Harry handed over to pay for his haul. Harry wasn’t sure if the woman was shadowing him or not, but decided to send the books home with Dobby just in case. He walked out of the store, and hoped he hadn’t given any indications of his suspicions.

He reluctantly decided to postpone the rest of his Knockturn Alley wandering until he could get a decent disguise together. He wondered if he should even go get the bookcases, but decided that if he was so clueless that he had only just noticed that someone was

following him, the cat was out of the bag on the trunks. All of them were loaded up now but his, and they hadn't been secretive when they bought their stuff. He decided that a trip back to Harrods was in order, they would have the bookshelves he needed, he had previously decided to let Luna pick out the rest of his décor (no real man bothers to argue with that).

Author's Note: Let me just say for the record that I have no idea where Harrods is in relation to Diagon Alley, let's just say for the sake of argument that you can get there easily via the London Underground.

He made his way back to Diagon Alley and over to the Leaky Cauldron. There was enough traffic in the Alley that he couldn't be sure if he was being followed. He walked slowly out into muggle London, trying not to look as though he was looking for someone. Sure enough, there was a woman who walked out of the pub, about 10 meters behind him. He got a decent view of her in one of the shop windows, it wasn't the woman from the bookstore, nor was it definitively Tonks. He ambled over to the nearest Underground station and got on the train. He kept his vision solidly away from the door, as if daring her to come on the train with him. She sat down a few meters away from him and took a book out of her handbag. The stop for Harrods was only a few minutes down the line, and both of them got out. Harry was struggling to act as normally as possible, while on the inside he was boiling. He had no doubt this was Tonks following him on Dumbledore's orders, the nerve of that old bastard. In the abstract Harry didn't mind the idea of a bodyguard, as long as the bodyguard reported to him, but having the old man know all of his movements pissed him off. He starting thinking of what to do, as he entered the store and went straight to the furniture section.

Harry didn't know much about these things, so he flagged down a store employee and explained his problem. He didn't feel the need to lie, so he honestly told the man that he had inherited a large library of books and wanted to buy a lot of shelves. After a short discussion about quality and price, the man directed Harry to some shelves that were build your own, where the customer puts the pieces together with a screwdriver. Harry bought ten of them, the shelves held about forty books each, he could always come back and get more. Harry

was not the most mechanically inclined, but he thought it would be a good diversion for Dobby and Winky. The clerk helped him bring them to the counter, where he paid with some pounds that Dobby had gotten from Gringotts for him. They loaded the boxes on a cart and took them outside to the parking lot, where Harry told the man that his uncle would be coming with an SUV that could hold them all. He slipped the man a 10 pound note for his help, and was soon left alone. He took a quick look around and decided to chance it, he shrunk the boxes and put them in his pocket. This was a spell he'd been practicing hard with over the last couple of weeks, along with some of the intermediate transfiguration spells. As he walked back to the Underground station he spotted his tail again, the woman hadn't even bothered changing appearances. He quickly got back to the Leaky Cauldron, it was now 6 pm and the pub was slowly filling up with the dinner crowd.

He threaded his way to the back, and the entrance to Diagon Alley. He walked through the door and ducked down to the side, putting a disillusionment charm on himself.....and waited. He didn't have long before the woman came out of the door, surprised to find no one there. Harry held his breath and took a huge chance:

### Expelliarmus

The woman was knocked to the ground and her wand flew up into Harry's hand. He walked up to her, with both wands pointed at her (he didn't know if he could use them both at one time, but he felt it would look intimidating).

"Who are you? Why are you following me?"

The woman slowly got to her feet, looking a bit groggy as she gazed on Harry.

"Wotcher Tonks."

"Wotcher Harry. How did you know it was me? What if you'd cursed some innocent person? Eh?"

"Righteous indignation doesn't suit you Tonks, so don't bother. How did I know it was you? Either I'm not as dumb as you thought, you're not as smart as you thought, or somewhere in the middle. I spotted you in the bookstore. You just spent an hour without knocking anything over, that must be a record for you."

"Very funny Harry....jeez, could you have put more power into that spell? My head is pounding like crazy. And give me my wand back."

"Not quite yet there Nymphadora, why were you following me?"

"Don't be dense Harry, you know why."

"I thought as much.....hmmm.....I wonder what Madam Bones will say about this? Will she be more upset that you were following me in the first place or that you were inept enough to get caught?"

"Too bad you won't find out, I'm on a leave of absence from Auror Command. I told them I wanted some time off to be with my new-found inheritance. I'm actually working full-time for the Order now, though I'm sure she suspects as much. My wand please."

"Nope. We need to chat a bit more Tonks. Are you the only one that follows me? Or have my 'minders' from Privet Drive simply been transferred here?"

"We have the same schedule and duties that we had before, I just have more of them now....particularly since none of the Weasleys or Remus will do it any longer."

"Well thank goodness for small favors, I guess Remus deserves a bit more forgiveness than I've been handing his way. So you've told the old meddler where I've been going have you?"

"Yes I have. I'm not relishing this Harry, but it's what he wants. You need protection whether you admit it or not, and for my part I don't think it's a very good idea for you to be wandering around Knockturn Alley, even in broad daylight."

"For my part Tonks, I'm not interested in your opinions on my traveling choices. You and I both know that while I'm not quite the equal of most Death-Eaters in experience, I can handle myself just fine. In all honesty though, I don't mind the idea of a bodyguard, if it was someone I trusted.....and I don't trust you, however much I happen to like you. Unfortunately all the people I trust were a bit too busy living their own lives today, so I was left to fend for myself. You should be extremely glad that I haven't mastered the Obliviation charm yet, or my little bookstore spree would be lost to you forever."

Tonks took stock of the expression on Harry's face and the fact that both wands were still trained on her. She had heard countless stories of improperly performed memory charms and decided that it was best not to provoke him into any experiments.

"Fine Harry, whatever you want. Now please, my wand."

"No thanks, I'll just keep it for the time being....don't worry, if you don't make any sudden moves at me I won't hex you. You tell your owner this: If he keeps this crap up, my enthusiasm for the war will diminish. I might just bide my time until I feel I'm ready, then go after Voldemort....oh stop flinching, for crying out loud you coward. I could have buried his hide at the Board meeting, but I didn't, and this is the thanks I get. No wonder we only won the last war on a fluke."

"What are you talking about, what meeting?"

"Just tell him what I said, and I don't want him suddenly appearing at my home wanting to talk. I'll see him on September 1st just like every other student....from a distance. I have no interest in co-operating with your little Order until I'm ready, and I'm not ready at this time. Assure your master that I have no interest whatsoever in turning dark, I just don't trust him when it comes to my personal life, or my involvement in the war."

"He's not going to like that Harry."

"So? You also have the option of not telling him anything of what happened today Tonks, don't forget that. Its not too late to join my side."

"Your side? The side of a 16 year old kid who attracts trouble the way the Weasley twins attract mayhem. No thanks Harry, I may not approve of everything Dumbledore does, but he's the best we have to lead us."

"I'm not trying to supplant Dumbledore as the head of your Order.....yet. That said, until he demonstrates a little more concern for my wishes, everyone who says what you just said is suspect."

"Fair enough Harry, I won't argue it with you."

"Fine, now let us take a stroll back to WWW, then I'll give you your wand back. And Tonks, if you apparate away I'll snap it immediately."

Harry tapped the bricks and they walked through to the Alley, toward WWW.

"How did it come to this Harry? We were friends I thought."

"You follow me everywhere I go and report everything I do to your boss and you have the nerve to ask me that question. That's how it's come to this. We're still friends Tonks, I happen to like you a lot, its actually my dream to hook you up with Charlie Weasley."

Tonks goggled a bit, then started blushing.

"Love had made a matchmaker I see, I know that you and Luna set Ron up with Amelia's niece. Shame about him and Hermione though, I actually thought they would work out, smooth out each others' rough edges."

"Hermione is very complicated, and things are very uncertain with her right now, as you no doubt have seen. I'm quite tired of listening to their arguments myself, if we had stayed friends there would have been a long discussion about that between us, probably ending with threats of violence from Ginny and I."

They reached WWW, the store was pretty empty as they entered it. Ginny and George were in the front, she was straightening out some

displays, he was doing some paperwork. They greeted the two of the awkwardly, as Harry was very visibly carrying both wands. He called Fred up to the front, and when Fred arrived Harry explained the situation. The Weasleys couldn't have looked less surprised, and fixed Tonks with sad stares.

"I wanted them to see this Tonks, so my own circle wouldn't think I was just being paranoid."

He handed Tonks back her wand, and she said her goodbyes and walked to the door.

"Oh yeah Tonks.....if I catch any other followers like I did today, I won't be so gentle."

"Is that a threat Harry?"

"Absolutely Tonks."

Tonks left without another word, and apparated away once outside.

The next 2 weeks flew by for Harry, as his days became very busy. He and Luna finally decorated his trunk, the bookshelves were just enough for the ones he bought and for his inherited books. He passed on the opportunity to visit Grimmauld Place and instead sent Dobby and Winky to go get them. They put in a waterbed and a few leather couches, along with a lot of candles, which Luna really liked. Harry realized that he had spent quite a bit of money over the summer, far far more than in all other summers combined. He did some figuring and the total came to about 17,500 galleons, and that wasn't counting the money he was going to take to school with him. This barely made a dent in his vault of course, and Harry knew that he needed most of the things he'd bought.

He and Luna did not test out the waterbed of course, except to have a very fun tickling fight on it. They were moving along wonderfully as a couple, but neither was in any hurry to shed any clothes. There was plenty of time for that in the future. In the evenings, while he was studying his curses, he got chapter and verse about Ron and Susan from the redhead himself. They hadn't actually gone on a date yet,

but were having a good time writing each other every day. Harry and Luna had told Ron about how they had gotten to know each other that way, and he decided that it made sense for him as well. Ginny and Dean were now an established couple, which caused Ron no end of worry about what they might be doing in Ginny's trunk while on their dates. Harry didn't much like the idea of it either, but felt that Ginny could control her own life just fine. He prevailed upon Ron not to voice any suspicions to Arthur or Molly, after all the shoe might soon be on the other foot.

Dumbledore had left him visibly alone since the Tonks incident, and Harry had not repeated his trip into Knockturn Alley. He did lunch once more with Remus, and things were finally going back to normal for the two of them and they promised to keep in touch during the coming term. He only left WWW to do his shopping in muggle London, he worked out a plan with Fred and George that would get him his beloved pizza in the future, through the trunks. The shop was officially a success, and the twins told him that they could easily survive the next 3 ½ months while the students were at Hogwarts. Harry told them that he would make sure their brochures were liberally distributed before meetings of the DA, when the twins and Lee would be coming into Hogwarts.

The last Saturday night of freedom culminated in a big party in Harry's trunk, where he showed off his new decorations. It wasn't a large party, just Harry, Luna, Neville, and a lot of Weasleys. Dobby and Winky had quite the mess to clean up after it was over, and the couches were littered with sleeping teenagers.

Sunday, September 1st, 1996

Harry and the twins went to Kings Cross Station on their own, taking a muggle taxi, everyone else was flooing from their homes to the nearest floo point. Harry had Hedwig fly up there on her own, she had again not been doing much lately, what with the trunk system. Plus he knew that the cabbie wouldn't want a screeching owl in his backseat. Harry shrunk his trunk (how poetic) and had it in his pocket as he and the twins traded comments about the sights they saw as they passed by on the way to the train. They got out with plenty of time to spare, and had some sodas at one of the kiosks in the muggle

part of the station. At 10:45 they walked casually up to the Platform 9 ¾ entrance and leaned in.

They came upon a familiar sight, one Draco Malfoy, standing next to his mother, but without his goon squad, who presumably weren't there yet. Young Draco was in the process of insulting Miss Hermione Granger, who was also with her parents. The Drs' Granger were looking a bit confused at some of the words that were being shouted at their daughter, clearly she hadn't told them what a mudblood was. Fred and George looked at Harry and sighed, what to do there? Harry nodded to them and they walked toward the altercation.

Unbeknownst to them, the new Hogwarts Professors, Melissa Bliss and Charles Shepherd, had come to stand at the doorway to the front train car, and were watching what was happening. They eyed each other and silently wondered if they should intervene, but chose to wait to see what Harry and the twins would do.

"Are you still on that stupid soapbox Malfoy? Don't you get tired of saying the same things over and over again?"

"Shut up Potter, this is none of your business." Malfoy looked at Harry with a look of dark hatred on his face, but didn't fail to notice that Hermione wasn't smiling at Harry's approach.

"Go away Draco, you're not wanted here. Leave it to you to harass people who can't defend themselves. Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger, pleasure to see you again. Hermione, I hope you had a good summer." Harry gave them a smile that he only partially felt, but he knew it was best that their rift be hidden from outside people for as long as possible.

Fred and George greeted them as well, wands in hand, which considerably calmed Hermione's parents.

"You can go to hell Potter, my father is in Azkaban because of you!!"

"Well trying to kill people will generally cause that Draco, I don't know what you expected. I'm glad he is where he is, I hear Azkaban is lovely in the fall."

Draco lost the very fragile hold he had on his temper, but didn't draw his wand with so many people watching, he had seen the twins' wands out.

"I'll kill you Potter, the Dark Lord will rise again and your world will end!!"

Harry turned toward the Malfoys and gave them a small smile.

"I'm sorry ferret, what did you say? I wasn't paying attention to your drivel."

"I said I'll kill you Potter!"

"Ok.....whatever."

He nodded to the twins and they moved past Draco and his mother. Harry had never drawn his wand, so Draco didn't think anything of it when Harry walked close to him. Harry hesitated as he passed by Draco, as if deciding something:

He then swung his right elbow as hard as he could right into Draco's mouth.

Draco went down like a shot, and before Narcissa Malfoy could do anything, Fred and George had their wands inches from her nose. Fred gave her warning:

"Let him work Narcissa."

Harry bent over a moaning Malfoy and plucked the wand from Draco's pocket, and said in a very loud voice:

"It's not nice to threaten people's lives Draco, especially when you have proven yourself incapable of beating me at anything in the past. At least your jailed daddy knows how to fight."

He then gave Malfoy a vicious kick to the face, and threw Draco's wand on the ground.

He walked up to Hermione, the twins keeping both eyes on Narcissa, who was still too shocked to move.

“Are you Ok Hermione?”

Hermione had a stunned look on her face, she looked at Harry with a confused expression, but thankfully didn’t smack him.

“I’m fine Harry, you didn’t have to do that. Why did you have to hurt him like that.”

“Yes I did have to do that Hermione, or something like that, he needs to be taught a lesson, and I couldn’t get away with that at Hogwarts. He’s run amok for far too long. Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger, I’m sorry you had to see that. I’m not a violent person by nature I assure you. I know Hermione’s likely told you that she and aren’t on the best of terms any longer, but I promise you I’ll watch out for her when we’re at school.”

“Thank you Harry, you have a good term.”

“Hermione, we need to talk, seriously.”

“I know Harry, but not here, and not with a crowd of witnesses. We’ll do it tonight, after people have gone to bed, just us.”

“Us and Ron, he’s as much part of this as we are.”

“Yes, Ron too. I’m going to go to the Prefect’s car now. I’ll see you at the Feast.”

Hermione grabbed her trunk and went into the first car. Harry and the twins had their farewell and he got on the train to get a car for his group. He was stopped by the two new professors, who introduced themselves. Melissa pointed at a now standing Malfoy, who was having the blood cleaned off him by his mother:

“Quite a display Harry, did you plan that?”

"No ma'am, I would be eternally grateful if I never saw that git's face ever again."

"Well it's a good thing that no points can be taken off.....though your friend would get some points off as well for his threats. I guess it doesn't pay to piss you off, does it Harry?" Charles Shepherd, Slytherin though he was, looked a bit pleased at what happened.

"It doesn't pay to threaten to kill me, then not do it. It was a pleasure meeting you Professors."

"Likewise Harry, it will be a fascinating year." Melissa and Charles went back on to the train, and Harry found an empty compartment to wait for his friends.

End Chapter

Oh, I'm not a songwriter or a poet, so there won't be a Sorting Hat song this year.....just assume it's the same one that its Order of the Phoenix.

It wasn't long before Ron and Ginny joined him in the car, with Neville and Luna soon to follow. Ron stayed long enough to hear about Harry's assault on Draco, and the curious reaction of the two new professors.

"What did you think of them?"

"They seemed nice enough, the man...Shepherd....he was actually smiling, and this is the new Head of Slytherin. Very strange. I think you'll have a friendlier time of it in Potions this year. They didn't lift a finger while I was working over Draco. Not that they legally could mind you, but I'm surprised that they didn't try." Luna looked concerned:

"I thought our plan was to reach out to the Slytherins, this isn't going to encourage them Harry."

"That's why we have five hours on this train to make sure that we start rumors that I was only going after Malfoy. This will be helped by two facts: it's the truth; and Malfoy and I have a history of such incidents. Since Ron is the only one of us that needs to go to the Prefects meeting, the rest of us have a chance to do some recruiting. Oh yeah Ron, you and I are going to have our chat with Hermione tonight. She actually spoke to me in a normal tone of voice, it was kind of freaky.....like she was a bit scared of me." Ron reluctantly asked:

"Do you blame her? I mean of being scared, of all of us. Hermione was used to being our leader and we performed a coup. I think she feels threatened."

"Well she should Ron, you're dead right when you said there was a coup, and I did it. I was chafing under her 'rule' and so were you. Now I know that a lot of what she said made sense, like study hard, and don't get killed." The compartment all smiled at that. "The problem is not the message, it's the delivery. A delivery that not only isn't

winning her friends, its alienating people right and left. Malfoy and his people get a lot of mileage out of Hermione, and we need to stop that.”

“How would we do that? You and I both know that threatening Hermione won’t do us any good, it will just get her back up.”

“I don’t know Ron; we’ll just have to play it by ear when we talk with her. And Ginny.....if you use an Extendable Ear to listen in, just make sure you don’t get caught OK?”

“Who me? I’m shocked that you would think such a thing Harry.”  
Ginny grinned at them all.

“Whatever Ginny, just remember what I said. We don’t need any points docked this early do we?”

They all laughed, and Ron made to leave for his prefect meeting.

“Ron, when your Prefect meeting ends, bring back Ernie, Hannah, Padma, and Anthony will you?”

“Sure thing, just the 6th year Prefects?”

“For now, I’m going to talk to Katie at the feast and get her and Cho to start with the 7th years. I don’t see most of them being too involved with the DA since they have NEWT’s coming up. Same with the 5th years and their OWL’s, so the bulk of the work is going to come from our year. While you’re gone we’re going to be doing some visiting. We’ll be here when you get back.”

With that, Ron left the compartment and went up to his Prefect meeting.

Harry turned to Luna and Neville and gave them some slips of paper that he had written before the others got there.

“Luna, I want you to find Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot and give them these. Neville, go find Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley. We need to do some talking.”

They left and Harry turned to Ginny.

"OK Ginny, I need to know something: Just how much have you shared with Dean about all that's been happening?"

Ginny looked at him funny, where was he going with this? Surely they could trust Dean couldn't they?

"I told him an abridged version of the Department of Mysteries, and he knows about my trunk of course." She winked at Harry when she said this.

"I don't really want to hear about that Ginny, except to tell you that if Ron catches you at anything I will not lift a finger to protect Dean from him. You do your messing about at your own risk. What I'm asking is have you told him about the floo system and about the Prophecy?"

"No and no. You told us not to share either with anyone and I have no trouble with that. I don't see what the big deal is about the floo, but you did pay for the trunk and its furniture, so I don't mind."

"I want the floo to remain private because relationships change Ginny. I don't want you and Dean breaking up next week and have him turn to Lavender or Parvati with all your secrets. The floo is our link to the outside, since it connects with the twins' trunk. We can go to Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade whenever we want, and that can't get out. Not to Dean, not to Hermione, and certainly not to any teacher."

"I see your point, that makes a lot of sense. Eventually, if Dean and I last, I'm going to want to tell him some things about our core group."

"That's fine, just give it until Christmas. If you two are still an item then, feel free to share the floo and Dobby and Winky with him. I'm not trying to dictate to you Ginny, I'm really not. We just have to be a tight unit for now. We're five strong, getting another sixth person is going to take time."

"Are you going to tell Ron the same thing about Susan?"

"I already did Ginny, last week after another one of his recitations of her latest letter. He reacted much as you did, but he understood as well."

The compartment door slid open and Luna came back with her fellow Ravenclaws. Terry and Lisa sat down and looked at Harry with expectant looks on their faces. He was about to say something when Neville and the Hufflepuffs arrived.

"OK, this is the first coordinator meeting of the year and we have some things to talk about. First things first.....which of you is on good terms with the following students: Blaise Zabini, Tracey Davis, and Daphne Greengrass?" Terry Boot brightened at Daphne's name.

"Daphne and I have known each other a long time; we played sometimes when we were kids. I wouldn't call us close friends now, because of the House difference, but I can talk to her."

"Great, as soon as this breaks up I want you to go get her and bring her here. I want to start making my inroads into Slytherin today. How about Blaise or Tracey?" Lisa shifted in her seat:

"I wouldn't call Blaise and me friends, but we are in every class together. He's a quiet guy, I never see him hanging around Malfoy.....speaking of which, did you really beat him senseless on the platform?"

The newcomers leaned forward in hopes of a juicy tale....which Harry promptly granted them, including homemade sound effects of what the multiple impacts sounded like. They ate this up just as he had expected. Harry hadn't shared with his friends, and had no intention to, that he had assaulted Malfoy for two reasons: one was personal hatred, like everyone thought; the other was to galvanize what he figured must a rather large anti-Malfoy feeling that was out there. Harry knew that Malfoy had been running amok for five years, abetted by his bodyguards and the blatant favoritism of Snape.....what's more, he knew that Malfoy had not been terribly discerning in his choice of targets. Harry wanted all of this to come back to bite Malfoy where it hurts the most. There was a real danger

of a Voldemort invasion of the castle, and Harry wanted Draco to be as insignificant a part of that as he could.

"Lisa, I need you to bring back Blaise if you can. I don't want either of you to tell them who they're coming to meet, or they might not do it. Let me get a chance with them, and we'll see if they can be trusted. Susan, do you feel comfortable approaching Tracey? Justin, I'm not quite so cruel that I would send any muggle born to a compartment loaded with Slytherins.....beat us in Quidditch this year and I'll change my tune."

That brought a laugh, and Justin recoiled in mock horror at being made to go to a Slytherin compartment. Susan looked abashed as she answered:

"Honestly Harry, no I don't, at least not on the train. I know that she's nice enough, but in five years I've never really had a conversation with her. That's the problem with these Houses; they've made us so insular. In addition to our Defense training in the DA, we should also schedule some social stuff, just so we can get to talk to students that we wouldn't ordinarily get to talk to."

"That's fine Susan, and I appreciate your honesty in saying no. We'll see if Blaise or Daphne will do something. That's a good idea about the socializing by the way. We'll set something up either in the Room of Requirement or on a Hogsmeade Day or something like that. Now did everyone make a list of five targets for recruitment?"

They all nodded and wordlessly passed Harry their lists. He gave them a read through and recognized none of the names except for the ones from his own House. The Hufflepuffs' lists, which amazingly didn't overlap one name, concentrated on the fourth year students, while Lisa and Terry shared two names on their list, and was from the third and fourth years equally. Neville and Ginny also picked from the third year predominantly, Harry hadn't had more than a passing hello with anyone on their lists, but could picture their faces.

"I take it you're confident of all these names?" Seeing them nod their heads yes he smiled, this was a good entre for him into the younger years. "I'm going to talk with Professors Flitwick and Bliss about any

of the first and second year students who show great potential in Charms and Defense. If they point any out I'll talk with them myself and use some of the 'Boy Who Lived' magic on them.....no pun intended, Merlin knows it should be good for something. Now the first DA meeting will be a week from today, with just our core group that was at my party. We're going to brush up on our spell work, since we're going to be the ones working with the individual groups of students. My plans are to have each of the core group responsible for a small sub-group of students, while I oversee the whole thing and work with each group as much as possible. I'm not going to cap the number of members in the DA, so we could have as many as 180.....though I doubt it will be much more than half that. For the time being, meetings are going to be held on Sunday afternoons, that way we can make them longer if we need to, and it won't interfere with any Quidditch practices."

"You mentioned at the party that Flitwick will only be at about half the meetings, how are you going to do that?"

"Good question Justin, and one I don't quite have the answer to yet. I'm thinking that we'll hold official DA meetings on the Sundays, every other week. The unofficial ones, where I work with the core group, will be spaced out a bit differently, randomly to avoid easy detection. I'm not sure if that's feasible with the number of people we have, and what Dumbledore would say if he caught us. I'll know more after tonight, I'm sure he's going to want to talk with me either tonight after the feast or tomorrow sometime, I'll be better able to gauge his mood then."

The group spent the next half hour going over their lists, after hearing them discussed Harry was confident that at least his coordinators had the right characteristics in mind. Harry's pie in the sky goal for recruitment was half the student body (140 or so). To do that he would need most of the non-Slytherin Houses, since he didn't hold out much hope for more than 20 or 30 among the Slytherins.

Harry looked at Lisa for a moment and decided something:

"Lisa, I wasn't going to bring this up until Padma got here, but I want you to hear it too. The harassment of Luna by your House is going to

have to end. I'm not saying or implying that you had anything to do with it, indeed Luna speaks well of you.....but the mistreatment of her stops. If it takes both you and Padma and every other sixth year girl to do it, I want you to keep Luna's roommates in line. I'm saying this with Luna in the room so that there will be no misunderstandings."

"I hear you Harry, and I agree. This stuff should have stopped a long time ago. I'm sorry that it's taken this long Luna; you can count on me to help you whenever you need it. Did you talk to Cho about this?"

"Ron mentioned it at the party; he spent a lot of time with Cho and Michael at my behest. She promised to do her best."

"I know most of this harassment comes from the girls, but I'll do what I can to keep the guys out of it Luna. I can't speak for them, but I'll bring every pressure to bear that I have to."

"Thanks Terry, I'm sorry that both of you have to be put in this position. I don't want to be a Ravenclaw leader, I just want to be a normal member of our House....as normal as I can be." Lisa smiled at that

"We never should have allowed this situation to get this way Luna. I'd like to think that your roommates are going to mature of their own accord, but if not.....there are things we can do."

"I don't want anyone to be hurt because of me Lisa, this isn't that important." Terry looked at her with an odd mixture of respect and curiosity.

"Yes it is Luna, it's that important. Never mind that you're Harry's girlfriend, though that presents its own kind of issues.....but it's high time we started protecting our own. This is war Luna, and we can't act like spoiled children any longer. Your roommates will see the light Luna; they'll know you're on the right side. If they persist.....well like Lisa said, there are things we can do to persuade them the error of their ways.....nonviolently of course Luna, no one need be hurt during our lessons."

"Fair enough Terry, I won't interfere with whatever you do." Luna squeezed Harry's hand hard; he smiled at her and marveled at how forgiving she could be. This was a trait that he himself was lacking lately, and he knew it. Harry was vastly tempted to go Marauder on Luna's roommates, but decided to see if Terry and Lisa could do it peacefully. He reserved that thought for later though; nothing was out of the question to protect Luna.

They chatted for a few moments longer, and Lisa and Terry left. Harry held back Justin and Susan for a moment.

"Ok, we only have a minute before, hopefully, Blaise and Daphne get here. Tell me guys, how solid is Zach Smith? He was a problem at some of our meetings and I noticed that he didn't come to the party, even though we reluctantly invited him. I would have figured him over Marietta to turn on us if I'd had to bet, but he didn't." Justin looked a bit uncomfortable at the question, but Susan answered:

"I don't think he's solid Harry, I don't see him passing the parchment test."

"What makes you say that? Do you agree with her Justin?"

"I'm afraid she's right Harry, Zacharias doesn't like you, and I don't see him accepting your leadership anymore."

"Is that what this is? Some kind of personal thing with me? We barely know each other. Is he in danger of going Dark?"

Susan and Justin both looked at each other and that was all the answer Harry needed.

"Say no more you two, I understand. Now go and enjoy the rest of the ride, we'll see you at the feast."

They said their goodbyes and left the compartment. Harry looked at his friends and sighed, another hassle to deal with. Neville looked at him curiously:

"What are you going to do about him Harry? You suspected something like this or you wouldn't have asked the question."

"I was hoping I was wrong Neville, and I don't know what to do about Smith. I don't have all the answers you know. We're just going to have to have Justin and Ernie contain him if they can, if not....."

"What do you mean if not? We're not talking about killing him are we?"

"No Neville, we're not talking about killing him. First we need to find out if he's just arrogant.....or arrogant and dangerous. If he's just arrogant then we really don't have to do anything, he'll sink himself. If he's dangerous? Then we'll do what we have to do to get him kicked out of school at the very least. I'll lean on Dumbledore if I need to; though that's not something I want to do very often if I can help it."

Lisa and Terry returned with Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, it turned out they were in the same compartment and quite easy to find. The Ravenclaws excused themselves, as did Ginny, Neville, and Luna. Daphne didn't look at all surprised to see Harry, while Blaise clearly was caught off guard.

"I'm sure you're wondering what this is all about. I don't know either of you that well, and this will be the first substantive conversation we've ever shared, but we have things to discuss. War is here, and probably it will be here in Hogwarts. I'll be blunt Blaise, Daphne: I want you on my side, I need your help."

There it was, out in the open, a direct appeal to two Slytherins. In the brief second before they answered Harry wondered if a year ago he could have seen himself doing this, asking Slytherins for help. Blaise closed his eyes, lost in thought. Daphne looked Harry right in the eye:

"How hard was that? Saying that you need our help? This must go against everything your Gryffindor pride teaches you."

"It wasn't as hard as you might think Daphne.....though the irony is not lost on me. A year ago.....heck two months ago, if you told me I'd be here in this situation I'd have a nice chuckle. I'm maturing though as I

get older (Harry smiled at them, and he got smiles in return), and I've come to realize how much I've been tarring you all by the brush of my close friend Malfoy. Not all Gryffindors would be happy with me right now if they could overhear this meeting, but what we're dealing with is more important than House rivalries and outdated stereotypes." Blaise finally opened his eyes:

"I agree, though I always expected the first overtures to come from Granger, not you. Weasley hates us and I know that he's influenced you in that regard."

"Ron is aware that I wanted to talk to you on the train ride, he might even join us if the Prefect meeting gets out earlier than expected. It took some convincing, but he's on board. Let's just say if he entered the compartment now and saw you, his wand would stay in his pocket. Hermione is another matter, and not one to be discussed right this second. How familiar are you with our Defense group from last year."

"Familiar enough to know that we weren't invited to join it."

"That was then, this is now Blaise. I can't change what happened last year, we were very paranoid about betrayal, and in point of fact we did get burned, and were forced to go underground. This year we're legitimate, recognized, and authorized. I didn't ask you two in here to join the DA; I want you to help lead it."

This was not what the two Slytherins were expecting, they looked at each other and words seemed to pass between them. Daphne spoke up:

"That is not what I thought you were going to say. I figured that you wanted us to spy on our Housemates for you."

"I want that too, but that's secondary to your DA roles."

"What role do you have in mind for us Harry?"

"Blaise, I want the two of you to help me recruit DA members from inside Slytherin. I don't want any Death Eaters in training or anything like that, but students in your House who want to fight on our side,

and for our cause. Once in the DA, which House people are in will not matter at all, everyone will be equal. I have the right to exclude anyone I want from the group, Dumbledore has agreed to this, but I will be applying that right to all the Houses, not just yours. Malfoy and his acolytes will not be allowed in, but beyond that....all Slytherins are eligible."

"I can tell you right now that all four of my roommates are ineligible. Nott is the least nasty of the bunch, and he's no picnic. I'd bet good money that Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle all have their Dark Marks already. The 7th years are a bit less hardcore, but there isn't one I would ask right this second to join the DA."

"I won't go that far about my roommates. Tracey Davis is not Dark at all; she just comes from a tradition of Slytherin kids. If I were the Sorting Hat I probably would have put her in Ravenclaw. Pansy Parkinson of course is a goner, she's so in love with Draco she'd do anything he told her to. Millicent.....I don't know about her, she gets a bad rap, but I think it might just be because she looks like a female cross of Crabbe and Goyle. I know she doesn't hang out with that group very much. Mary Sweet doesn't socialize with us much; most of her friends are in the younger years, where she can kind of be queen bee. She's nice enough, but I don't know about her loyalty. The younger years are the ones I would target if I were you Harry."

"None of my core group feels comfortable approaching Tracey directly, will you do it?"

"Sure, I'll talk to her tonight after the feast."

"Can I count on both of you? Are you in?"

"What does 'in' mean? How public are we going to have to go with this?"

"Public, very public Daphne. We're going to need to galvanize the school if we're to protect it."

"Protect it from what? Are you talking an invasion?"

“I wouldn’t put it past Voldemort to try exactly that. He wants both Dumbledore and me dead, once this train hits Hogsmeade; he’s going to have to come to us to do it. There are 70 students in Slytherin, and I know that you two aren’t the only good ones, you won’t be alone.”

“Why does Voldemort want you dead so badly? Why does that seem to be his single focus in this war?”

“That is a story for another time Blaise, once we’ve gotten to know each other better. It’s not something to hit you with, or trust you with, on our first real conversation.”

“Fair enough. One more question, how much input is Dumbledore going to have in this group?”

“How much do you want him to have?”

“None, I don’t trust that man as far as I can throw him. I’ve heard too many stories from my father about rules he’s bent and truths he’s shaved. I’m not saying it’s a deal breaker.....”

“Dumbledore will have as much influence as Flitwick allows him. He’ll be our faculty sponsor, though I will not clue in him on most our private doings. He’ll be helping us with spell work we’ll be practicing, as well as helping with the younger students. The inner group, which I want you two and Tracey to be a part of, he will know very little about. Dumbledore and I aren’t close any longer, which relates to the story I alluded to earlier, and I don’t want him having access to our secrets. I should tell you that there is a parchment that you need to sign, agreeing not to betray us, to anyone. Bad consequences will be suffered by any violators of their word.” He took out the magic parchment and offered Daphne a quill.

“This is what happened to Edgecomb isn’t it? That’s why she was always covering up her forehead.”

“This will be much worse, trust me.” Blaise and Daphne looked at each other, shrugged, and signed the parchment. Blaise grinned at Harry:

"I only signed because I was afraid you might beat me up if I didn't." Harry cracked up, a sense of humor even in a Slytherin guy.

"That was for him and him only I hope. I won't deny that it was fun, but I would prefer not to do it on a regular basis. Make sure your housemates know it was between Malfoy and me, it was not an attack against all Slytherins.....though I'm sure Fred and George Weasley would have preferred it if Crabbe and Goyle had been there. It's all over the train isn't it?"

"Oh my yes, and in record time too. That's all we talked about for the first half hour. Apparently Malfoy is going to have to be chugging some Skele-Grow to replace the teeth you knocked out."

"It hurts a lot Blaise, I speak from experience. Expect some moaning tonight in your dorm room."

"Great, thank goodness I paid attention while they were teaching Silencing Charms."

The door to the compartment slowly slid open as Ron poked his head in.

"Mind if we come in?"

"Sure thing Ron, good thing the meeting didn't bore you to death, I was getting worried."

"Almost Harry, I'm tougher than I look though."

Ron walked in with four of his fellow prefects in tow: Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Hannah Abbott, and Ernie MacMillan. They looked very surprised to see Blaise and Daphne in the room, and with smiles on their faces to boot. Ron didn't look a bit surprised and greeted the two of them in a friendly manner, holding out his hand for them to shake. They did so, and the tension immediately dissipated.

"Told you two he'd be fine with it."

"I stand corrected; I guess we're all getting older and more mature aren't we? Well we'd better get back; I have about 2 minutes to come up with a cover story for where we've been; its best not to hit our friends with the truth quite so soon. When's the first meeting?"

"A week from today, I don't know precisely what time yet, I'll make sure you find out as soon as it's decided. Blaise, Daphne.....welcome aboard, I'm glad to have you as allies, and hopefully soon: friends." Daphne shook her head in wonderment; this was not how she envisioned her train ride going.

"We are too Harry, we'll see you soon."

With that, Daphne and Blaise left to go back to their friends.

Ron handed over a Knut to Harry, in payment of the bet they had made.

"I'm happy to lose a Knut for the cause. That went well I take it?"

"Better than well Ron, they're with us all the way. We just gained ourselves two very smart and cunning allies. They'll be good for our group; I'm looking forward to getting to know them."

The meeting with the Prefects went pretty much as the earlier Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw meeting did. They went over their lists and discussed the recruitment in their Houses. Ron and Harry assured them that Gryffindor would be ripe for their efforts as well, given that half the core DA were either current or past Gryffindors. Ernie questioned Harry pretty extensively on his Slytherin plans, but seemed convinced after Harry's sales pitch.....a pitch he had to work harder with on Ernie than he had on Blaise and Daphne. While he was getting a bit perturbed by Ernie's forcefulness at times, Harry knew that he would need all the help he could get with Zach Smith. He also remembered that Ernie had been among the first to declare for his side the previous year, something he made sure he was appropriately grateful to Ernie for. Diplomacy was a new animal for Harry, but he decided that the results made it worthwhile.

His Luna speech went over in much the same with Padma and Anthony as it had before as well. They pledged their support to end the harassment, with Padma in particular looking irritated that it was still going on. Padma told him straight out that she knew if Ravenclaw didn't clean it up, he would do it for them and she didn't want that.

After the meeting broke up, Harry and Ron started a game of chess while the rest of their inner circle trickled back in. Harry updated them on what happened, they all laughed when he told them about Malfoy's teeth. Malfoy himself never made his usual appearance during the journey, he was either wising up.....or more likely flat out couldn't speak without his missing teeth. Harry for one was hoping that he would show up, just so he could see the results of his handiwork up close. The rest of the ride was uneventful and they soon pulled into Hogsmeade Station.

As they all exited the train and headed for the carriages to take them to Hogwarts, Harry paid close attention to his friends; he wanted to know who could see the Thestrals and who couldn't. To his immense relief only he and Luna appeared to see them, nothing new since they had the previous year as well. As he approached the Thestrals he remembered Hermione's appalling comment from last year (Oooh, I wish I could see them) (Do you really?), that remark was one he often thought of to quell the regrets he had about allowing their friendship to end. He saw Hagrid from a distance, herding the first years together for the boat trip to the castle. Harry often wondered who Hagrid would choose if there was a serious breach between him and Dumbledore, he supposed he was about to find out. As they walked up to the carriage they would be riding in, the group passed by some Slytherins that included Tracey Davis. When they passed each other, she looked Harry straight in the eye and nodded her head; another one was on the team.

Once they arrived in the Great Hall, Harry's first instinct was to look for Malfoy, but there was no sign of him. Crabbe and Goyle came in together, but without Draco. Harry watched them until one of them looked his way, which happened to be Goyle. Goyle stared at him with a blank expression, but visibly flinched when Harry winked at him, then looked away. Harry chuckled and turned back to Ron and

Neville, who'd been watching him watch Crabbe and Goyle. He shrugged and said that the ferret must be with Madam Pomfrey.

"You really think Dumbledore will just let that pass? I bet you anything he brings it up next time you two meet."

"Oh I'm sure he will Neville, but Platform 9 ¾ is not part of Hogwarts and thus not in his fief. Draco could try to have me arrested for assault I suppose, but then would have to explain his death threats. I think Draco will keep this between us, he doesn't want to involve the authorities any more than I do at this point....especially with his dear daddy still locked up."

The students finished filing in and took their seats. The professors wandered in randomly, except for McGonagall, Trelawney, and perhaps Firenze, Harry wasn't sure if the dual teaching arrangement was going to stick. He felt it would, unless someone had made the other centaurs see reason and let him back into the herd. Either way Harry didn't regret for one minute his decision not to take Divination, it was fun at first to make things up for his homework, it rapidly got boring though. The new professors, Shepherd and Bliss (for some reason Harry thought of them as a double act since he had met them together while they were on the train) sat on the extreme opposite ends. It gave Harry a start as he looked for Snape and then remembered why he wasn't there.

Eventually, after rather long wait, McGonagall appeared at the entrance way, with about 45 rather nervous looking children in tow. As they passed by Harry heard McGonagall mutter something about poltergeists and what she'd like to do to Peeves. The first years mostly had petrified looks on their faces, only a few looked calm and unsurprised, clearly these were siblings of current or past students. The uninitiated first years stared at the battered old Sorting Hat that Dumbledore had placed on the main table. McGonagall made her little speech and the Sorting Hat sang its song, which again dealt with House unity and peace. Harry whispered to Ron:

"Isn't this the same song the Hat sang last year?"

"Seems to be, I really wasn't paying attention too closely last year."

The sorting took place over the next 30 minutes: 12 students going to Gryffindor; 14 to Hufflepuff, 11 to Ravenclaw, and only 8 to Slytherin. Hufflepuff's table wasn't large enough to sit all of the new students, so Dumbledore waved his wand and an extra section appeared on the end. Harry and his friends weren't on the side of the table nearest to the new students, so he couldn't get a decent look at them. He did notice how small they were, particularly compared to some of the older students. He wondered if he had been that tiny when he was a first year (Harry had now grown to 5'10", Ron was 6'1"). Dumbledore rose to speak:

"Welcome all of you to another year at Hogwarts. Our start of term notices can wait until we've all been fed and watered. Let the eating begin!"

With that, food magically appeared on the tables and everyone dove in. The chatter at the table, in Harry's area anyway, was light and relaxed. Seamus gave a rambling tale of his trip to the United States, visiting with his muggle father's relatives. They didn't know about Malcolm Finnegan's unusual marriage, and Seamus had had a lot of fun inventing stories about school that he could tell his muggle cousins. The Creevey brothers (Harry was thankful that there appeared to be no more of them) were snapping photos of everyone, they had talked about starting some kind of yearbook or annual, as a way to get their photos out there. Harry had taken some time at his party to explain to them that he wanted them to go easier on the photos of him, but also to increase their photo taking of the other Houses. Harry didn't have a specific plan in mind for this, but thought that at the very least it would get them to leave him alone, maybe it would have other value later on. After dessert Dumbledore stood again, and after visibly patting his stomach, began to give his start of term notices:

"First off, I would like to introduce our new Professors: Professor Melissa Bliss will be taking over the Defense Against the Dark Arts program. She is a former Auror whose expertise will greatly benefit all of you. She is a graduate of Hogwarts, of Hufflepuff House."

The Hufflepuff table stood up and cheered, and after Harry discreetly motioned to his House-mates, Gryffindor gave as healthy round of applause as well. Bliss noticed Harry's prompting and gave him an appraising stare. Harry didn't notice this; he was clapping for no other reason than to get off on the right foot with his new teacher.

"Our other new Professor is Charles Shepherd, who will be teaching Potions and is the new Head of Slytherin House."

There didn't need to be any prompting as well over 250 students rose to their feet and gave the loudest cheer Hogwarts had seen in many years. Even most of Slytherin seemed very happy and were standing and celebrating. Many first years stood as well, seeming to think it was required, and were yelling as loud as the older students. Dumbledore felt a bit sad that his friend not only wasn't missed, but whose removal was such a cause of jubilation. Most of the school by now had been aware of Snape's dismissal, though Dumbledore had exerted every influence he could with the Daily Prophet and The Quibbler to keep the details of why, out of those papers. He was aware that The Quibbler only held off because of Harry's acquiescence, he doubted that Luna's father would refuse to print the story if Harry had wanted him too, particularly given Harry and Luna's new relationship.

"It's nice to see such a warm welcome to our new faculty members, I've no doubt they both appreciate it. Unlike last year, the new staff will not address you at the feast, but will get to know you in the usual manner in class. I would also like to say that our Divination co-teachers are both going to be with us again. Professors Trelawney and Firenze unfortunately could not be here with us tonight, but will again be dividing their duties, with Professor Trelawney instructing the third through fifth years, and Professor Firenze instructing the two uppermost years."

"Mr. Filch would like me to remind you that magic is not allowed in the corridors between classes, and that all products of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes are now on his banned items list. Anyone wishing to peruse this list, Mr. Filch will be happy to show it to you. The Forbidden Forest is still out of bounds, and Hogsmeade visits will be for third years and above, who have the proper permission slip.

Quidditch tryouts will be held in the coming weeks, your team captains will post the notices.”

The Headmaster paused for a moment, as if gathering himself.

“Students, you have undoubtedly all heard about the return of Voldemort ad nauseam. I won’t burden you with another lecture about the dangers you are facing, growing up in our world. Your heads of House will be talking with you in the next few days about security and protection. It is my understanding as well that Mr. Potter will be restarting his Defense club, and that it will open to students of all houses (with that, all eyes turned to Harry, who stared pointedly at the Slytherin table as he nodded his head). We must do all we can to protect each other, so that your education will benefit you in every way possible.”

“On a much lighter note, there will be another Ball this year, though we have not yet decided whether it will be a Yule Ball or a Valentine’s Day Ball. Said decision will be made before the end of the month, so that clothes and dates can be arranged. With that, I bid you now to return to your dormitories. First years, the prefects will lead you and ensure that you do not get lost. Your timetables will be waiting for you at breakfast tomorrow morning. Have a good evening, and get plenty of rest.”

The fifth year prefects rose first and began herding the first years towards the door. The older students hung back to give the new kids room, and they began slowly walking to their various dormitories. By the time Harry and his friends got to the common room most of the new students had gone up to their rooms, only a few were downstairs poking around. After about an hour of idle chatting, people began going up to bed. Soon only the DOM students (minus Luna of course) were left. Ginny and Neville looked at Harry for the signal to leave, but he didn’t give it. Hermione had no such inhibitions though:

“Neville, Ginny.....the three of us need to speak alone. I know Harry and Ron will likely tell you everything that we talk about, but it will be easier for me this way if it’s just us.” Harry gave them the nod then, and they said their goodnights and left. There was silence among them for a couple of minutes as Harry and Ron both resisted every

temptation to look and see if there were any Extendable Ears showing. Ron had suggested lending Ginny and Neville the invisibility cloak, but Harry nixed that, saying that they needed to be squeaky clean for this. If Hermione wanted it just the three of them, she could have it.....Harry just made it a point not to tell the two of them not to listen in, and he assumed they were. Now that there were no witnesses, in theory, Harry made the decision to force things right away.

"So how have you been Hermione? We missed you at my birthday party."

"I've been fine, this was a quiet summer for me, and I'm glad. I didn't come to the party because I didn't think you really wanted me there."

"If I didn't, you wouldn't have been sent an invitation.....though I understand it would have been awkward for you. Speaking of awkward Hermione.....why didn't you cross the room that night?"

Hermione flinched at this being brought up so soon, like Molly Weasley before, she found this new take charge Harry Potter to be very disconcerting. He and Ron were both looking at her in a kind of sad way, and that made her want to cry. In a way she had been hoping that they would be angry at her, instead they seemed more disappointed than anything."

"Harry.....it's not as simple as that, and you know it. I know why you're so bent on challenging Dumbledore, and while you may think that you're right, you're not."

"I knew that must be part of it, your worship of Dumbledore. You really chose him over me? There must be something else."

"Harry do I really need to spell it out for you? We almost died at the DOM, all six of us.....and what did we almost die for? For some Prophecy whose contents anyone with half a brain and some knowledge of the situation can figure out. I'm 15 years old Harry, I don't want to die. You and Ron both seem hell bent on doing whatever you can to get yourselves into danger, and it almost seems like you don't care about living or dying. Every year something

happens around here, usually centered on you, and the two of you behave as if these are mysteries to solve, with no consequences if you're wrong. Well you were wrong Harry, about the whole vision, and about Sirius being taken. Yet you claim that you've gotten past his death, a death that your recklessness helped happen. It may have been Bellatrix Lestrange who cast the spell, but Sirius would only have come running there if it was to help you."

There it was, finally out in the open. This was the first time anyone had even indirectly accused Harry of being complicit in Sirius' death and it hit him hard. Hermione's tone of voice had been quiet, but accusatory while she was talking. She seemed a bit amazed that she had to explain it. Ron wasn't so amazed though:

"I don't recall anyone twisting your arm to go with us to the DOM Hermione, in fact I clearly recall Harry begging all of us to let him go alone. You went there with your eyes wide open Hermione, and it is the height of hypocrisy for you to blame Harry for you almost being killed."

"We went there to help Harry, who in reality should have left the Prophecy, and the supposed rescue of Sirius to the Order, where it should be."

"The Order, I keep hearing about this great Order of the Phoenix.....what have they done? They kept Harry in the dark so long that he had no choice but to believe those visions, since they were the only information he was getting. If it had been me he saw being tortured, he would have done the same thing, and he would have done it for you too Hermione."

"I don't want anyone dying for me Ron!!! Don't you get it? I don't want to be a part of this war; I just want to be Hermione Granger, student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"You know its not that easy Hermione, you're involved now. Malfoy has undoubtedly been feeding his daddy all of my friends and associates and what he knows about them. Along with Ron, and now Luna, you're at the top of their list. I'm not saying that I won't let you walk away, quite the contrary.....but they won't be so eager to do it."

"Quite the contrary.....I noticed that when you didn't tell me your plans ahead of time."

"I didn't trust you not to rat me out, my plan wouldn't have worked unless it was a complete surprise to Dumbledore. You would have told him."

"Yes I would have Harry, what you did was ill-advised. I'm not saying that I agreed with you going back to your relatives every year, no one deserves those people. You need to be protected though, not only from Voldemort, but from yourself. You've never had any freedom Harry; too much too soon would be.....it wouldn't be healthy."

Harry looked at her with amazement, that this person who he thought was his best friend (along with Ron) was talking about him as if he was some autistic kid who could barely tie his own shoelaces. He voiced a question he'd wanted to ask for sometime now:

"How long have you been telling Dumbledore what I've been doing? I'm guessing years Hermione."

"I've never once gone to him and told him what you were doing Harry.....but I've answered truthfully every question he's ever asked me. I will not lie to him. He's only concerned with your well being."

Harry saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, and used his Seeker reflexes to grab Ron's wand out of his hand. Hermione sat very still, as Ron looked at her like he wanted to murder her there on the spot.

"You informed on Harry?!??! On us??!!! We're the only true friends you've ever had here!!"

"I refused to lie to our teachers Ron, that's what I did. I don't expect you to understand respect for authority, given that you don't have any. You can hex me all you like, it won't change that. I've been a good friend to both of you as well, your grades wouldn't half what they are if not for me."

"Tell me this Hermione.....if I had asked you, say....6 months ago, if you were 'answering questions' about us, would you have told me the truth?"

"I don't know Harry, I really don't. Why didn't you ask me?"

"That's easy, because I was afraid of what you might tell me. We've been through a lot Hermione, all three of us. I didn't like the idea of throwing it away unless it was absolutely necessary."

"That's your choice Harry. I'm not going to say that I don't like you anymore, but I'm afraid that your new attitude is going to get me killed. I just want to survive my last two years here and move on. I know that you'll do whatever Harry does Ron, so I guess that means that we're splitting too."

"I was disloyal to him once Hermione, I've never been more ashamed of anything I've ever done, before or since. That won't happen again."

"So you'll just blindly allow him to lead you into this war?"

"No Hermione, my eyes are wide open. I know that you don't believe that, since it doesn't fit in with your view of me, but it's the truth."

"Well then I'm sorry Ron, you do what you feel you have to."

"So what would like to do Hermione? Shall we stage some public argument for you, so that Malfoy can see it and inform his Master?"

"No Harry, I won't do anything for that fool's benefit. I'm just going to attend my classes, do my work, and go about my life."

"Are you intending on being part of the DA?"

"I don't know, probably....if enough other students join. I won't help you run it though."

"That's not an option anyway, and you know it. With you out of the leadership I have a better chance of getting a more diverse membership, since you are not terribly popular."

Hermione looked as he'd slapped her.

"That's quite ungrateful of you Harry, since the DA was my idea to begin with."

"An idea you forced me into, yes. You are a very smart witch Hermione, no one can deny that. Your people skills, however, need some honing.....another thing few people will deny. For the record, I'll allow you to join, as long as your nose seems clean. Flitwick will be there anyway, so your demi-god will know the substance of our meetings regardless."

"Whatever Harry, you do what you must."

"I meant what I said on the platform to your parents. I'll make sure that we keep a watch over you, if Malfoy and his ilk hassle you, he'll regret it."

"I suppose it would make no difference if I asked you not to bother?"

"Would it have made any if I'd asked you not to tattle on us to the old man? Didn't think so. I am sorry it has to be this way Hermione, but like you said, it's for the best."

"Yes it is. I wish you both luck, I really do hope that you'll be graduating with me in two years. Maybe once the war is over.....things can be different."

"Maybe they can, maybe they can." Harry looked at Ron, and they both got up. As he passed her by, Ron rested his hand on her shoulder for a brief moment; they then went up to their room.

End Chapter

Author's Note: If there has been an explanation in the five books about how class schedules are figured out, I must have missed it. With that in mind, I'm simply going to give the students the same style of schedule as American university students, which will make it much easier for me to write.

There is something else I would like to say. I appreciate all the reviews I've gotten, the feedback that you've given me has been invaluable.....but there are a few reviews that have gone beyond negative and into the realm of the obnoxious. To those of you who curse at me in your reviews, or use multiple exclamation points to make your criticisms: You do not help your agendas by doing these things. If you don't like the story, don't read it.

11pm

### Riddle Manor

Snape looked around the empty main meeting room at Voldemort's hideaway with more than a little foreboding. This was not a scheduled meeting of the inner core, and he didn't expect more than a handful of people at the meeting. This was supposed to be a strategy session, which raised Snape's nervousness to unusual heights. This new Voldemort was taking some getting used to on his part, being allowed to voice his own opinion on matters with his Master was not something he was accustomed to either. It was ironic how all three sides in the war were in essence, dictatorships: Fudge for the Ministry, Dumbledore for the Order of the Phoenix, and Voldemort for the Death Eaters.....and somehow Voldemort was turning into the most reasonable of the three....in as much as the sharing of information and planning of operations. As far as Snape could tell the only ways to get to Fudge and Dumbledore were money and blackmail, respectively. As much as he loathed Potter, he quite admired the way he had Dumbledore doing his bidding.

Voldemort entered the room, closely followed by Peter Pettigrew and Bellatrix Lestrange. The four of them were what now constituted the inner core of the Death Eaters. Pettigrew looked healthier than usual, and was not quite so sniveling. He had played his objection to the Department of Mysteries plan and its resulting fiasco into a seat at

Voldemort's right hand. Lestrange was undeterred by the imprisonment of her husband and his brother, and was more fanatically loyal to her Master than ever. Snape saw the way that she looked at Voldemort and suppressed a shudder; he hoped that his intuition there was off.

"Ok everyone, let's get started. Snape, I believe you have a report for us."

"Yes Master, I do. I have the Prophecy that you seek."

"You do? Might I ask why I'm finding this out now instead of.....I don't know.....immediately?"

"I got the information just an hour ago Master, I broke it out of the mind of one of the Order members."

With that, Snape told them the Prophecy. Pettigrew, though less fidgety than before, got up and began pacing.

"Who did you get this information from Snape? Do you trust it?"

"I got it from an Order member named Hestia Jones, I performed a Petrificus Totalus on her and then mined her brain for information.....and I learned quite a bit. Apparently Potter forced the old man into telling the Prophecy to all of the Order, insisting that they know what they're supposed to be protecting." Lestrange interrupted him:

"How do you know that this isn't a piece of disinformation meant to expose any spies within the Order?"

"Because I also learned from her that the breach between Dumbledore and Potter is very real, and thus I don't see them cooperating to the point of maintaining that level of a ruse. Potter, as part of the deal to keep me out of Azkaban, got his emancipation.....much to Dumbledore's fury apparently. Potter has garnered himself some allies within the Order and it would seem that the old fool is fearful of a takeover."

"The power he knows not.....what do you think that means Snape?"

"I don't know Master, though I doubt Potter or Dumbledore know either....otherwise they would seek you out immediately and attack you. I'm sure they could bury their differences with each other long enough to do that. That said, I think that in the unlikely event that they destroy you, they'll take a week to celebrate....and then immediately turn on each other, quite violently."

They all smiled at that image, then got back to the matter at hand. Peter stopped pacing and sat back down, he eyed Snape suspiciously.

"What did you learn from Fudge, which side is he leaning towards?"

"I think he favors Potter, from what I was able to glean from him in our conversation. The idiot seems convinced that Dumbledore either wants to be Minister himself, or wants to pull strings from behind the scenes. Either one is unacceptable to our dear Minister."

"So he doesn't favor Potter as much as he loathes Dumbledore? Sound familiar anyone?" Pettigrew looked at his Lord:

"That seems to describe your approach Master. You don't hate Potter, do you?"

"Not at all Peter, in fact I think I understand Harry Potter better than anyone in Dumbledore's circle. He and I are much alike after all: mistreated by muggles all our childhoods, orphaned at an early age, kept in the dark about the true extent of our abilities....oh yes my friends, Harry Potter is quite the young man. They couldn't have done a better job seducing him to our side if they actively were working for us."

"He's refused to join you before Master, what makes you think he'll change his mind?"

Voldemort started laughing, not an evil laugh per se.....more of an exasperated one. This was where he usually started in with Crucio, but his wand never made an appearance.

"And they had you teaching Snape? Have you learned nothing of children? He was 11 years old when he refused me!! I'd hate to be bound by the idiocies I must have spouted when I was that age. I know this must be hard for you Snape, but try to put away your hostility toward that boy, at least for now. You just don't seem to be able to judge him rationally in that state. Don't you see what he's doing? Bella? Peter? Do either of you see it?" Bellatrix had a look wash over her face, while the two men just sat there looking confused.

"He's setting up his own Order, one that reports only to him.....he wants his own power base so that he can fight the war on his own terms. The issue seems to be who his main target is: The Ministry, Dumbledore, or us."

"In a nutshell, yes. Do you two not get it? The only moves Potter has made so far this summer have been against Dumbledore, not us. Now I have no doubt that he feels anger toward us, he might even hate us as a group.....after all the three of you have certainly done your best individually to harm him, as have I. The thing to remember is this: we have never lied to him. Peter, you betrayed his parents, not him....under the threat of considerable punishment if you did not; he had his chance to let you be killed and he passed on it. Bella, you killed his godfather: a man who was certainly trying to harm you at the time. Snape, he hates you because of the way you've behaved towards him: a totally genuine performance, you really hate him back and always have. I have tried to kill him many times, and the Prophecy explains to him why I did. What did Dumbledore do? He took his entire life from him. He put him with those muggles; he didn't even let him know he was one of our kind until he got his letter. Then he left him to his own devices over the next five years, as attempt after attempt was made on his life. He may hate us because we're 'Dark'.....but he hates Dumbledore for much better reasons."

"Do you think it's gone as far as that? From what I took from Jones they appear to have reached some form of détente."

"Only temporary, if I know our beloved meddling Headmaster. The first thing he'll do is try to infiltrate Potter's Defense group.....which we all know is more about offense than defense. Potter will

undoubtedly catch him and the rift will widen. Then there is the matter of the old man having Potter followed everywhere he goes.....Snape, talk to Draco as soon as you can about finding out more on that. The incident today will heighten Draco's hatred of Potter and draw him more under our control." Snape looked confused:

"What incident?"

"Potter assaulted young Draco on the train platform. It seems Malfoy fils was spouting his usual death threats and Potter elbowed him the face, and then kicked him in the teeth. It was quite amusing to watch actually."

"You were there?"

"Yes I was, under an invisibility cloak. I instructed Draco do something like that, to see what Potter's response would be. Neither of us anticipated what actually happened obviously, but the event served its purpose."

"Have you given Draco his Mark yet Master?"

"Yes I did Peter, and his friends Crabbe and Goyle as well.....if you can say that a Malfoy actually has 'friends' and not lackeys. That family, they amaze me. They seem to take pleasure in being hated by everyone, as if it was a badge of honor. Narcissa asked me bluntly why I didn't kill Potter right there on the platform, for what he did to Draco."

Peter couldn't hold back any longer and let loose the laugh he'd been holding in ever since talk had turned to the Malfoys. No one, even on the light side, was happier about Lucius Malfoy being in prison more than Peter was. He liked having the ear of Voldemort as his prime counselor. He knew that Voldemort would never truly trust Snape again, the guy had switched sides so many times Peter doubted even Snape knew who his true allegiance was to. Bella.....well Bella wasn't all there mentally, even she knew that. She was nothing more than Voldemort's attack dog. He looked at her, even she was smiling.

"Are you the only intelligent one in your family Bella? One sister marries a muggle, the other.....I mean come on, does she not get what we're doing here?"

"She dotes on her son, like all mothers do. None of us has children, it's hard for us to judge. I agree my sister isn't the smartest witch on the planet, but she is loyal to us."

"Yes she is Bella, and while I was certainly heartbroken to refuse her request, I couldn't kill Potter."

"How loyal is she going to be while her husband continues to rot in prison?"

"She really doesn't care. She has the Malfoy money for the next 8 months, until Draco reaches his majority, and I'm sure she'll either make an arrangement with him afterward, or sequester some of it for herself. I'm told she's found other....means to satisfy any other problems she might have. Draco doesn't especially want him out of prison either, he now has a freedom of action that he would never have while he was under Lucius' thumb. He's quite eager to do his first solo muggle torture."

Snape brought up something he'd been wondering about since his encounter with Jones.

"The Order and Potter both seem to be worried about an invasion of the school, to kill either the old man or the boy....or both. Is this something you're thinking about?"

"Not with any degree of seriousness Snape, at least not a full scale one. The quickest way to galvanize the rest of our world against us is to attack a building full of children. That said, I'm not ruling it out for the future if we have to get ugly. Now a small covert insertion.....that I like, if we have to take someone out, or get a message to someone. Peter, is that entrance through Honeydukes still working?"

"It was in March, the last time I tried it. I doubt Potter and his friends would willingly give up its location to the teachers, it's their only way in and out of the school undetected. I'm sure Draco has used it since

then, though it's more dangerous for him, since he doesn't have the map."

"Good, we'll make use of it soon enough."

"Master, how much time are you going to give this Potter plan?"

"A few months Bella, likely until the Winter Holidays. I want to give him and Dumbledore more time to split before I make him another offer. I know that all of us want this to happen tomorrow, and part of me is tempted to go back to the old ways and just start murdering everyone until we get what we want. We must face facts that that particular strategy did not work the last time. Even before the Prophecy was discovered and I had my unfortunate 'accident', we weren't winning. These are different times, and they call for different plans. Now Snape, what did you do with Jones after you raided her memories?"

"I killed her Master; I brought her into the street and ran her over with a muggle car that I 'borrowed' for the occasion. She was the only one at Grimmauld Place last night, and I was not supposed to be there, so they won't tie me to it."

"Very creative Snape, it will be interesting to see what conclusions the old man draws from it. He has so much invested in you that I doubt he would suspect you even if everything points toward it. Say what you will about Dumbledore, he's loyal. Now Peter, tell them what our Wizengamot projections look like."

"Right now of the forty members of the body: six are solidly with us under every circumstance; another five are with us as long as it doesn't expose them too much; eleven are totally behind Dumbledore; nine are Fudge loyalists who can go either way depending on the issue; that leaves nine more that are wildcards in every way and have no ingrained loyalty to any of the three factions. Right now it would be highly unlikely to get a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority to oust Fudge, if that's what we wanted. He would need to do something quite stupid, and for once he seems to be getting good advice. Potter of course is the x factor, sometime soon he's going to at the very

least choose between Fudge and Dumbledore, and that will greatly sway the undecided.”

“You’re giving him too much credit Pettigrew, Potter has no instinct for politics, he’s far too direct.”

“True enough Snape.....so far. You’ve said that he has Peter Tyson and Bill Weasley as his principal advisors, that means he’s gotten, or is getting, a nice political education. One of those two is going to be Minister of Magic one day, we all know that. All of the events pressing in on Potter have forced him to deal with politics much earlier than usual, and it’s hardened him.”

The rest of the meeting dealt with more mundane matters, and soon everyone went their separate ways. Snape couldn’t tell if Voldemort and Lestrange left together, but they appeared to head in the same direction. He turned and saw Pettigrew watching him with a large grin; the rat knew what he was thinking.

Monday, September 2nd, 1996

Harry, Ron, and Neville walked down to breakfast together, not saying much. After Harry and Ron had returned to their room, they discovered that Neville and Ginny had been listening as expected. What they hadn’t expected is that Neville was forced to petrify Ginny, who after hearing Hermione admit to informing on them, had drawn her wand and was taking aim. Neville took her wand from her frozen hand, and then reversed the spell, after which Ginny seemed much calmer. Well.....calmer to the point that she didn’t hex Neville in retaliation after she got her wand back. She had gone to bed without another word, and Neville warned the other two about possible retaliation by Ginny against Hermione.

What was much worse, was that Harry (who had finally learned the scanning spell from Gred and Forge) found multiple listening charms in their room. Unfortunately he found them after they had discussed their meeting with Hermione. Harry hadn’t been expecting to find anything at all; he’d only really done the scan on a whim. He knew from his theory reading that listening charms (which he had specifically studied, with a mind to placing some of them himself)

couldn't pick up very quiet whispering, so he was reasonably confident that whomever was listening wouldn't hear him do the spell. He had immediately motioned to his roommates to keep talking while he figured out what to do. He briefly considered getting rid of the charms, but discarded that notion. The big reason was that he wanted to see if any other rooms had them, or if they were just on this one. He quickly wrote down some instructions on a sheet of parchment, and gave them to Neville and Ron. Dean and Seamus looked at him questioningly, and he wrote for them to go the boys' bathroom, he followed them and stood in the hallway as he considered his options.

Ron's note sent him to Dennis Creevey's room, Neville's to Colin's. Harry wanted to check their rooms for listening charms, to see if this was an isolated case, or whether it was just Dumbledore being Headmaster instead of Spymaster. Harry didn't want to risk alerting Ginny just yet, the risk being that he had no way to get in touch with her besides knocking on her door or popping through her trunk.....not terribly subtle in either case. Plus the trunk option would alert her roommates to the floo system. He mentally slapped himself for not thinking of this earlier, he could have obtained a few sets of those two-way mirrors that Sirius had given him. He decided that he would send Hedwig to the twins as soon as possible to take care of that.

The Creevey's heads popped out of their respective doors, Dennis looked as if he was about to say something when Harry frantically motioned for him to be quiet, while Ron physically put his hand over Dennis' mouth. Harry looked at Colin and pointed to the spot Colin was occupying, he got the message to stay put while Harry snuck into the third year dorm room. He did his scan and found nothing, nor did he find anything in Colin's room. The sixth year boys retreated into Harry's trunk and discussed what was going on. It was obvious even to Seamus, the least informed of the roommates, that Dumbledore was keeping very close tabs on them. They quickly decided to keep quiet about anything remotely important while in their room or in the Common Room, which was likely bugged as well. Harry shared with Dean and Seamus a few more details about his Dumbledore difficulties, but decided not to key them into the trunk system.....though he knew that Ginny likely had already given Dean

access to her trunk via the fingerprint ID. They went up to bed, while Harry resisted temptation to stay in the trunk.

They spotted Ginny in the Great Hall, and motioned her over. They gave her big smiles and Harry and Neville began talking about the coming day, loudly. Meanwhile Ron slung his arm over Ginny's shoulder, in a brotherly way, and quickly whispered what had happened. She took it pretty well, as she had few worries about charms being on her room, given that none of her roommates were part of the 'program'. They were interrupted in their conversation by Hermione's entry into the Hall. Ron kept his arm around Ginny to stop her from getting up, as Dean also moved to prevent any confrontations. Harry kept his seat, he personally would have let Ginny do what she wanted to Hermione, and indeed thought a public place might be the best way to do it. Hermione moved to the end of the table closest to the teachers (the Harry group was more towards the door) and sat by herself. Soon after this happened, Malfoy made his first appearance, looking none the worse for wear, aside from being a bit tired. He avoided looking over at the Gryffindor table, and sat with his back to it, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

Midway through the meal, Professor McGonagall came by with their timetables.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster would like to see you after lunch. You will return with him to his office after your meal."

Harry nodded his understanding, this was not unexpected....in fact he'd been surprised that the meeting hadn't happened the previous night. He looked at his schedule, which was a bit sparser than in previous years, since he was only taking six classes instead of nine as he had in the previous three years (seven in the first two).

Monday:

Transfiguration: 9:00-10:30 am

Herbology: 10:45-Noon

History of Magic 2:00-4:00 pm

Tuesday:

Charms: 9:00-11:00 am

Care of Magical Creatures: 11:15-12:30 pm

Defense Against the Dark Arts: 3:00-5:00 pm

Wednesday:

Transfiguration: 9:00-10:30 am

Herbology: 10:45-Noon

History of Magic 2:00-4:00 pm

Thursday:

Charms: 9:00-11:00 am

Care of Magical Creatures: 11:15-12:30 pm

Defense Against the Dark Arts: 3:00-5:00 pm

Friday:

Transfiguration: 9:00-10:30 am

Herbology: 10:45-Noon

Not a bad schedule and an early start to the weekend, which was a nice surprise. He looked over at Ron's schedule and saw that it was pretty similar to his, substituting Potions for Herbology. Ron had three afternoons free instead of one, and Harry fervently hoped that he would spend that time studying. Life without Hermione was about to reach its hardest part: studying on their own volition. As much as he had resented Hermione's study bullying, he had to admit that it worked....to a point. Obviously it hadn't really worked with Ron, so perhaps a new approach was in order. He decided to talk with Susan

about this the first chance he got; she would be a good influence on Ron he thought.

Another thing Harry often wondered was how the teachers made it to so many classes, particularly the classes for which the entire school was eligible. He felt that time-turners had to be an integral part in such a plan, as well as multiple classrooms, so that the students wouldn't run into each other. None of the students knew the details of how it was done; it was a jealously guarded secret. Harry reasoned that the next time he had the old man over a barrel he would get the story from him.

The morning passed easily, as both Transfiguration and Herbology were more review sessions than anything. Professors McGonagall and Sprout barely mentioned the NEWT exams at all, instead focusing on what everyone remembered. Transfiguration was among the five classes that all students were eligible to take, no matter their grades, so Harry thought that the NEWTs wouldn't be mentioned as much. The NEWT standard in Herbology was an A, and his class was pretty full. He took a station next to Neville and just watched him while listening to Sprout. He and Neville had agreed on this over the summer, with Neville taking Harry's lead in Transfiguration (Ron was going to be Harry's project during Charms).

Harry and Neville raced up to their room after Herbology and disappeared into Neville's trunk, which was closest to the door. They floored to Ginny's trunk and popped out, the room was empty, with Ginny outside guarding the door. They had hastily arranged this at breakfast, with Ginny to be sitting on top of the trunk if any of her roommates were there. Harry quickly performed his scan and found no listening charms, after which Neville ran over to the door and pounded on it twice, alerting Ginny that they were done. They went back to their own room, and met Ginny in the hallway, signaling to her that her room was clean. The Common Room was fairly empty, so Harry did a quick sweep and found one listening charm by the fireplace.....which was known to be the former Trio's favorite spot to hang out. Harry didn't think that the listening charm could clearly pick up everything that was said if the room was crowded, but made a note of where the charm was so that they could change their seating arrangements. He ruminated that this might be a good opportunity to

feed the old man some disinformation; he would talk to Luna first, she had a good way of thinking outside the box.

Lunch went quickly, as the male trio (Ginny was sitting with Dean) quietly speculated on what Dumbledore wanted. Neville was convinced that the old man was just fishing; he undoubtedly wanted to see if he could catch Harry off guard to get some general information and try to re-establish a rapport. Ron had a different take, and thought that the main topic of conversation would be Hermione. He fully expected some kind appeal from the Headmaster to allow her into the DA leadership, as well as a tug on the heartstrings to cede to more of Hermione's concerns about safety. Ron informed them (Neville had chosen not to take Potions) that Professor Shepherd was a nice guy, and seemed to know what he was talking about. He didn't favor the Slytherins as Snape did; indeed he hadn't awarded or deducted any points during class at all. As the meal wound down, Harry looked up at the teacher's table and saw Dumbledore watching him. He got up and said his goodbyes, moving to the door. On his way there he stopped and gave Luna a kiss on the cheek while squeezing her hand.....which passed her a note informing her of the morning's events and where he was going. Luna knew the scanning charm too and was asked to do one on her room; they would meet that evening in one of the trunks. Harry moved past the Ravenclaw table, but didn't miss the amount of goggling Ravenclaw students who were receiving their first confirmation of the Harry/Luna relationship.

The Headmaster met him at the door, and they left the Hall.....well knowing that every eye in the room was on them. The walk to Dumbledore's office passed in a haze of greetings and banal talk, they hadn't spoken directly since their meeting with Amelia Bones about Snape, other than a hello at the Board of Governors meeting. Once in the office, Harry declined a lemon drop as he patted his full belly. He sat there with a polite smile on his face, with his mental defenses fully up, waiting for Dumbledore to begin the game.

"Harry, what happened on the train platform?"

"You wouldn't ask me if you didn't already know sir."

"I thought you were trying to reach out to Slytherins? Then you go and assault one of their leaders like that. Counter-productive, if you ask me."

"I'm sorry sir, but I didn't ask you. Malfoy is hardly one of their leaders; leave it to you to stick up for the most hated kid in school. I'll tell you that I have coordinators in place for Slytherin, and they're fully on board with what we're doing."

"There have been a few times when you have been the most hated student in school, and I never failed to stick up for you.....but that's another matter. May I ask who your coordinators are? You told me you would say after you had sounded them out."

Harry didn't see any harm in this; it was bound to come out after the first real meeting anyway.

"Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot from Ravenclaw; Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff; Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley from Gryffindor; and Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin.....who were delighted at the pounding I gave Malfoy, I might add."

"I see, do you really mean to shut Ms. Granger out? From what I've gathered the group was her idea in the beginning. Has your friendship really been sundered to that extent?"

"Yes it has, and don't act all surprised Headmaster, you knew it was coming.....in fact I'd wager that's why this meeting was not held last night, so that the final split could be made. She told me about her informing sir, which alone would bar her from leadership."

"She did what was in your best interest Harry; she cares about you very much. You've hurt her greatly."

"In my best interest you say? Well you and I are just going to have to agree to disagree on that one, since you'll never convince me of it, nor I you. Her informing alone isn't what's denying her a leadership role; it's that she's so very unpopular with the other students. Surely it has not escaped your attention that her only remotely close friends

over the last five years have been Ron and I.....something you should have thought of before you forced into the choices you did. I wouldn't get more than a handful of Slytherins with her running things and you know it, I'm also doing better among the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs as well because of it.....though I will acknowledge that Luna is a larger factor among the Ravenclaws.”

“You are having this club with school sanction Harry; I could insist that you include her.”

“I’m not barring her from the group, simply from the executive board of it, and you agreed to allow me total control over the composition of the group anyway, if I allowed Professor Flitwick to be there.....and you know what will happen if you go back on our deal, I’ll go right to the Board of Governors and yank your pants.....err, robes down. I could have roasted you over an open fire with those people and you know it, I should expect a bit more gratitude.”

“Is that what you’re going to do all year Harry? Blackmail me whenever I do or suggest something that you don’t like?”

“We have an arrangement in place Headmaster, and I fully expect and insist that you honor it. The deal could have been much, much worse sir and you know it. I’ve had more than one person, whose opinions I value more than I do yours, who asked me why I went so easy on you. As it is, all I have to do is repeat what you just said to a few people, and Hermione will have a hard time finding anyone even willing to say hello to her. That said, I don’t want that. I have no interest in harming her at all; she’s going to be lonely enough without it. As long as you keep faith with our deal, my situation with the Dursleys won’t be brought before the Board.....and I’m confident I can speak for Edwina Portle in this instance as well.”

Dumbledore visibly sighed, both of them knew the truth in Harry’s words, the Headmaster didn’t have a leg to stand on. He fixed Harry with a sad look, and reflected that the death of Sirius Black had been horrible in more ways than one. Dumbledore was convinced that little to none of this would be happening if Sirius were still around, that his death was the prime catalyst for Harry’s new attitude. Things had been going reasonably well this summer: The Order was up and

running, Voldemort seemed somewhat contained, Fudge was finally on board (so it seemed).....and now this. His weapon was starting to insist on thinking for himself, somehow Dumbledore had been postponing the decision on how to deal with this scenario, not believing it would come anytime soon.

“What about your threats to Nymphadora? You cannot physically assault or hex anyone you please Harry.”

“As opposed to having me followed? You think that’s any more legal or ethical?”

“There is nothing in our law that prevents us from watching you; Peter Tyson should have told you that.”

“And what would the readers of the Daily Prophet or the Quibbler say if I told them that you were having me watched? I don’t object to the bodyguards, I just have a problem with you knowing every move I make.”

“You need to be protected Harry.”

“You keep parroting that line like it was the answer to everything. What do you plan to do when I’m no longer a student here? Every shred of your influence over me will be gone, are you that confident that the war will be over by then?”

“No Harry, I’m not at all confident about that. I have no doubt that we’ll reach an accord before then, and you’ll join the Order upon your graduation.”

“You’re assuming that I want to.”

“Yes Harry, you will want to. You need our help; you can’t take on Voldemort and his organization by yourself. You are very gifted in many ways Harry, but make sure your gifts don’t make you too arrogant.”

Harry was suddenly very tired of this conversation, he had just spent the morning with two class lectures and was due for two solid hours

of Binns.....even if he didn't plan to pay attention that well, he saw no reason not to cut short this lecture.

"We'll see Headmaster, there is a decent amount of time before this happens."

"Yes Harry, we have time. Now when is your first DA meeting?"

"A week from this Sunday, I'll be having flyers posted at the beginning of next week as to the time and place."

"Are you planning to have an enchanted parchment again? Given that you'll be out in the open, there is not an issue of trust."

Harry wasn't sure at that moment if Dumbledore knew about the parchment and was seeing if he was lying, or if he genuinely had no clue. The new and improved parchment allowed the signers only to tell Dumbledore, or anyone else not in the loop, vague generalities about the group activities.....and the existence of the parchment itself was not among those generalities. Harry had no idea how the hex actually worked, only that Bill Weasley assured him of its reliability.

"No sir, I don't believe that we will. I agree with you that the teaching of some spells and tactics doesn't warrant those kinds of controls. I reserve the right to change my mind later, but I don't see that happening."

"Good Harry, I would like to attend a meeting occasionally if you don't mind, to see what kind of progress you are making."

"I have no problem with that sir, I'd be happy to get your input. Professor Flitwick and I have a good plan for the first few meetings, which will be every other week at first. I had my introduction to Professor Bliss yesterday on the train; she seems quite nice, I'm sure I'll be soliciting her advice as well. Now if you will excuse me, I have to get back to Gryffindor Tower to get my bag, History of Magic awaits."

"Yes, we don't want to delay your nap (they both smiled). I'm surprised at you Harry, you didn't ask one question about what Voldemort is doing."

"I didn't think you'd tell me if I did. There have been no visions since the DOM, either from my improved Occlumency, or Voldemort's indifference. I have my own sources of information that don't fall within the Order, and they say all is clear. If you're worried about Remus, he hasn't told me anything, I won't put him in that position."

"I'm not worried about Remus, I know where his loyalties lie." With that very ambiguous statement, the two said their goodbyes and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower, via the Owlery, where he sent a note off to Fred and George about the mirrors. Ron and Neville were waiting for him, and he was amused to tell them that both of their theories about the meeting had been correct.

History of Magic was an interesting class in its composition: Harry, Hermione, Tracey Davis....and all ten Ravenclaws. Harry was the first to arrive and was soon flanked by Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. The rest of the Ravenclaws greeted him warmly, several of the girls complimenting him on yet again choosing a Ravenclaw girlfriend, showing his good taste. Harry blushed like crazy, but enjoyed the attention for once. Tracey Davis smiled at him as well, and slipped him a note as she passed by.

Harry,

Daphne and I sounded out Mary Sweet last night, and she is interested in joining the DA. Pansy and Millicent spent a lot of time quietly talking last night as well, so I would not recommend approaching Millicent, in spite of what Daphne told you on the train, and Daphne agrees.

Tracey

Harry fixed her with a big smile as she sat down in back of him. He signaled to Lisa to distract Hermione, and motioned to Tracey; she dropped her quill and leaned down to pick it up. Harry crooked his neck back and quietly whispered to her:

"The meeting is Sunday at 3 pm in the Room of Requirement, come with Blaise and Daphne. Tell no one else."

She straightened back up and nodded her head at him. The rest of the class went without incident, as Harry and the Ravenclaws basically ignored Binns and chatted quietly among themselves. Hermione shot them annoyed looks every few minutes, but Harry chalked that up to her wanting to pay attention to Binns. Tracey said little, but listened with interest to what was said.

After class was over, Hermione quickly left the room, and the rest of the class (all of whom were done with classes for the day) continued their conversations as if nothing had changed, just at a louder volume. Harry was assured that Luna's roommates had been warned already, there was to be no messing about with her. They broke up when dinner time came, and went to their respective Houses.

At 10 pm the quintet assembled in Harry's trunk, the night had been an easy one thus far, the highlight being Ginny defeating Ron at chess for the first time in two years. Ginny's victory dance would be long remembered by all the Gryffindors present, while Ron sat back grousing, "She wins one game out of a hundred, good grief."

"What are we going to do about the listening charms Harry? We can't just leave them there can we?"

"What's the alternative Ron? In a technical sense the old man isn't doing anything wrong. It's his school, he can place whatever charms he wants. I wouldn't blame him a bit if he had them on all the rooms, and I would look very foolish if I complained even now."

"Thank heavens that Hermione confessed before we found out about the charms, otherwise we might not have even asked, she would still be around to spy on us."

"Oh I would have asked Ginny, be sure about that. I've been wondering about her for over a year now. Luna, there are none of them in your room?"

"No there aren't, nor are there any in the Common Room."

"Well at least we know, and before we spilled anything important....this year anyway. We have to assume that the Room of Requirement is suspect as well, so a new meeting place for the executive council is going to have to be found. We can use the room for the time being, we'll owl Bill about countering the charms temporarily. That will last for a meeting or two, but eventually Dumbledore will catch on."

"What about the Shrieking Shack? If we magically expand the central room it should be big enough."

"That has its own set of problems Neville, and it's tied to another thing that we need to figure out.....what to do about Hermione. Come this Sunday, if she's in the Common Room, she's going to see who's not there and figure it out. Now short of stunning her, I don't know what we can do about it. The Shrieking Shack is suspect because we have to either use the Honeyduke's passage, or the trunk floo. The trunk floo is out as far as I'm concerned, I don't want 30 other people to have knowledge of our escape route, no matter what parchment they signed; Honeyduke's is compromised in my opinion, I'd be shocked if Hermione hasn't told someone about it.....and in the unlikely event she hasn't, she will as soon as she notices the emptiness of Gryffindor Tower during meeting times. It's the same reason we can't use the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione can't get into it, but she does know where the only entrance is." Luna shook her head.

"I think we have to take a chance with Hermione, we can't stun her. She'll go running to Dumbledore and it will bring us down. It will be seen as violating your deal with him. Let's see what Bill and the twins think, like you said we can get away with the Room of Requirement for at least one meeting." Ginny stood up and started pacing.

"Hang on a second, there's nothing that says we have to go offsite. Our inner council now has in its possession three members of Slytherin House, who inhabit the dungeon area of the castle. Now the only parts of the dungeons that are used now are for their Common Room and the Potions classrooms. There has to be more than one unused room in there that would good for our purposes. I say we get

Blaise, Tracey, and Daphne and put them in front of the Marauders Map. They'll find us a room and then we'll get Bill and the twins to ward it to the teeth so that no one can find it. Bill can put it under Fidelius if necessary."

Jaws dropped as you could see all four of their minds working, trying to pick up a flaw in that plan. Ron found his voice first:

"Well it's pretty clear who the smartest Weasley in the room is. That win in chess must have given you a mental boost."

Ginny smacked Ron on the arm, but was grinning while she did it. She looked at Harry, who did think of one thing:

"Well the only flaw I see is a minor one: How to get there without alerting any of our Slytherin enemies. It's a great idea though, and I for one can't think of anything nearly as good. It's the last place anyone would look for us, even if Hermione does discover our absence. Our Slytherin friends will help us figure out the best way to get down there. Aside from being nice people, it was the best decision we could have made to enlist them into our group. Ron, we need to use Pig to send an owl to Bill, I'd use Hedwig but I sent her off to the twins this afternoon to get those mirrors. I ordered 10 sets in all, for all the coordinators as well as us."

"Sure thing, just write the note and I'll go up to the owlery tonight, since I'm a Prefect and not bound by the curfew."

"It's about time the position had some advantage. Ok, let's get this done. Ron, I want you to go get Katie and take her with you. Fill her in on what's going on."

"Why Katie?"

"I don't want you or anyone else out there by yourselves this late at night. We know that if you ran across Draco and Pansy you might have some problems, best to take along some backup. We need her anyway; she and Cho are our major links to the seventh year students. I have no problem with you using the invisibility cloak to do

it, but its best not to risk it on something this routine." He went over to his desk and scribbled a note to Bill, informing him of the situation.

Ron, Ginny, and Neville said goodnight and left. Harry and Luna relaxed on one of the couches and spent some quality time together.

Tuesday, September 3rd, 1996

Harry, Ron and Neville left Care of Magical Creatures and headed back to the castle for lunch. They had lingered to talk with Hagrid after class, but he visibly avoided Harry throughout the lesson, which turned out to be on owls. He had fixed all three of them with sad stares (Hermione was not in the class), and often seemed to be shaking his head, he disappeared into his cabin as soon as class was over. On the way back Ron raged at Dumbledore, who he blamed for forcing every Order member to choose sides. His parents were still uncomfortable around the old man, and Remus had told Harry at their last lunch of Dumbledore's continuing remoteness from him. Neville agreed with him, he had talked to his grandmother right before the train left, and she had no intention of joining the Order, and would instruct the rest of the family to stay out as well. This was one of the few moments when Harry was bitterly regretting his decision not to leave Hogwarts, this whole business with the Headmaster was making him tired, and it was only the second day of school. He made a private vow to ditch Britain and this world as soon as the war was won.....he would take his friends with him if he had to.

After lunch was Harry's free period, during which he went into his trunk with Ron and Neville, they practiced spells for an hour to refresh themselves. Defense Against the Dark Arts was at 3pm, and everyone was seated and ready to go ten minutes prior to class starting. The class was relatively small, and consisted almost solely of executive council DA people, along with Hermione.....and even some of the DA people were electing not to take the class, figuring they could learn more from Harry than any hack that Dumbledore was capable of finding. Malfoy and his group were noticeably absent; indeed Blaise was the only Slytherin of either sex in the class. Dean, Seamus, Lavender, and Parvati were also skipping, leaving the Gryffindor contingent at four. All of the Ravenclaws were signed up,

as were about half of the Hufflepuffs. All told the class numbered twenty people, and they were all awaiting Professor Bliss.

Bliss ran her first class as a purely practical exercise, no paper or quills used. She told them this week and the next would be strictly review, so she could see just what they were all capable of. She had random volunteers demonstrate the spells they had learned, and would pick out random students as well to explain the theories and talk about dark creatures. On the whole the class did pretty well as, except for Blaise, they were all Harry-trained in spell work, and everyone was Remus-trained in dark creatures. The two hour class period passed by in no time. Harry lingered behind at Bliss' signal. Once the classroom was clear, she smiled at him.

"So Harry, how did I do? Did I pass muster?"

"Why I don't know what you mean Professor, but in my opinion you did fine."

"You know what I mean, you're the leader of those people and you know it. I lost count of the number of those students who looked at you after their spells, for your approval."

"How much did Remus tell you of our past teachers?"

"Enough to know that I'm surprised you guys knew as much as you did. From what he told me I figured that only you and a couple of other people would even know how to hold a wand properly."

"Remus has a weird sense of humor at times, I'm sure he was exaggerating. We're ok, we did a lot of studying last year on our own, and it helped a lot."

"I'd say so; you had the highest Defense score in over three hundred years. You even beat Dumbledore and Grindewald (like most wizards and witches, Bliss wasn't aware of Voldemort's true name, Tom Riddle). I'm fairly surprised that Dumbledore didn't just give you the job outright."

"Well the Headmaster and I aren't getting along too well at the moment ma'am, this is a man who even wouldn't make me a Prefect.....I can't see him doing anything so radical as to hire me. Besides, he more or less got my teaching services for free last year, why take the trouble to pay me?" They both got a chuckle out of that one. Bliss was making a good impression on Harry, but he knew that's what she wanted, so he took it with a small grain of salt.....then again he was attempting to do the same thing with her.

"Now I've heard much of your defense group, I hope at some point you'll allow me to attend a session."

Harry made a split-second decision and nodded his head.

"Sure thing Professor, in fact why you attend the first meeting. It's a week from this coming Sunday, in the Room of Requirement at 3 pm, are you familiar with where that is?" This was really just going to be an organizational meeting after all, he didn't see the harm in her seeing how they were set up.

"Yes I am, Dumbledore explained it to me. He was quite complimentary about your group. The OWL scores from the sixth years were the highest overall in twenty years."

"Are you a member of the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Yes I am, however reluctantly. The Headmaster insisted on it if we're to take this position. I won't have any real Order duties, other than to teach Defense. Professor Shepherd is not in the same boat of course, all he cares about is Potions and wouldn't be much use in an attack."

"You two seem to know each other pretty well."

"We're friends; we've known each other since school."

Harry decided not to press his luck any more, and left after a polite goodbye. He had a vague sense of disquiet about what had just happened, though it was nothing specific that he could put his finger on.

The rest of the week passed easily enough for Harry and his crew. Everyone settled into the routine of their classes, which still hadn't moved on to new topics in most cases (Creatures and History being exceptions for Harry). Without Snape around the points race for the first week was pretty quiet, with Ravenclaw and Gryffindor leading the way. The only trouble caused were by the first years, who were newly away from home and reveling in their new found freedom; five of them had been caught on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, about to make a foray inside of it. Fang noticed the commotion though and started baying, which brought Hagrid out to rescue the students before they wandered in and found anything scary: like angry centaurs, giant spiders, or Hagrid's not so little brother.

Saturday was capped off by a massive pickup game of Quidditch on the pitch. It was an exhausting three hour affair, with no seekers, five chasers and two keepers on each team. Harry found out that he rather liked playing chaser; it was a nice change of pace, even if Cho's team slaughtered his by over 200 points. He received his first invitation to Ravenclaw Tower, and spent the evening playing muggle board games with his new Ravenclaw friends.

Sunday, September 8th, 1996

The problem about what to do with Hermione for the sake of the DA meeting was solved by Hermione herself: she wasn't in the Common Room anyway. Harry sent one of the Creeveys to go check to see if she was in the library, which she was, with three thick books spread in front of her. After wondering what in Merlin's name she could be studying this early in the term, Harry went into his trunk and told Bill, the twins, Angelina Johnson, and Alicia Spinnet that the coast was clear. The Gryffindor contingent gathered in the Common Room as Harry explained, reluctantly, the listening charms that were definitely on the sixth year boys' room, and more than likely on the Room of Requirement. He stressed that Bill go in there first, to cover and mask any surveillance charms that might be there.

At Ron's urging, Katie and Ginny were sent out a few dozen paces ahead of the group, to make sure that there were no teachers or irritating cats in their way. The coast was clear though, and the group soon got to the entrance. Harry had quietly spread the word among

the other Houses that no one was to enter until Bill got done with his work, and was relieved to find that they were the first ones there. Bill and Harry walked quietly into the room and began scanning.....they found no less than five separate listening charms: one in each corner of the room, as well as one on the ceiling. Harry and Bill stared at each other for a moment; it was not pleasant to be proven correct. Harry walked back outside and informed them what was going on. Bill came out after a couple more minutes.

"Ok, it's done. I put muting charms on all the problem areas; they shouldn't pick up anything we don't want them to. This will work as long as they don't know anyone is in here.....if that changes, they'll know we manipulated the charms and suspicions will rise, we can only risk staying an hour today. We all know who placed those charms, and what's at stake if we're caught. There is a contingency plan that we've been looking at, Harry will let you know more next week if it works."

With that, everyone filed into the Room, which was large enough to accommodate all of the students. The next hour was spent working on shields and basic disarming spells, given that the majority of them were underage and couldn't practice any of these things over the summer. Harry and the adults walked around, monitoring the students, as well as their own muting charms. Periodically one of the twins would go out into the corridor and check for intruders, but found none. As the meeting broke up, Harry handed out mirrors to all of the coordinators, and told them to carry them in their robes at all times. The mate to each mirror would be held by either him or Ron. Bill separated the Slytherins before they could leave and asked them to hang around for a few minutes. Harry produced the Marauders Map and explained their problem. After a few moments of oohing and ahing over the Map, the Slytherins got down to business. Blaise had done the most poking around down there, and seemed to know the terrain the best.

"The room that looks best is Dungeon Seven. It's a bit off the beaten path, but not so far. It doesn't go too closely to our Common Room, and from what I know there's nothing in it but some old desks and chairs."

“Is it big enough for our purposes?”

“It is Harry, at least for the group size we had today. Where are the main meetings going to be held, will the Room of Requirement hold all the students you hope will join?”

“I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter much anyway, I was always planning to use the Great Hall for those meetings. We need that kind of space, plus room to put in a dueling platform if we want to. Can you take us there now?”

“Sure, you want to put the charms on it immediately?”

“Better now than later. Bill, do you have time to do it today?”

“Yeah I do, let’s get to it.”

Harry asked everyone to go back to their Common Rooms except for the Slytherins and the graduates (Johnson, Spinnet, and the Weasley trio). They’d been gone long enough to make people wonder as it is, and Harry wasn’t sure if there were any other measures in place to track his movements.

With the Map in front of him, Blaise led the way down to the dungeons. They had a nasty moment when Blaise, who wasn’t used to reading the Map, almost didn’t see Filch approaching, but trouble was averted when the caretaker abruptly changed direction. Bill had his wand out, ready to take Filch down if need be, but put it away unused. They arrived at the room with no further incident, and Blaise was proven correct, the room looked just right for their purposes. Bill put the room under Fidelius, and it disappeared from the Map. Their new hiding place was now secure.

End Chapter

### Author's Note:

I should have specified this a bit earlier than this, but here is the Executive Council of the DA (in my story, there may be some deviations from canon):

Gryffindor: Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan, Colin Creevey, Dennis Creevey, Katie Bell

Slytherin: Blaise Zabini, Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass

Hufflepuff: Hannah Abbott, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones

Ravenclaw: Padma Patil, Luna Lovegood, Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Cho Chang, Stephen Cornfoot, Su Li, Mandy Brocklehurst, Morag MacDougall, Lisa Turpin

Alumni: George Weasley, Fred Weasley, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, Lee Jordan (who won't be there much).

Bill Weasley will be there as well, but to help instruct. That adds up to 34 students and former students.....which seems like a lot, but is pretty accurate (I subtracted Zach Smith and Hermione, and added the Slytherins and a couple of Ravenclaws). I'm a Ravenclaw at heart, which I hope explains a lot of the emphasis I'm putting on their House. Don't worry though, Gryffindor will remain the overall focus, there won't be any re-sortings of any kind.

### Hogwarts Staff Room

6:00 pm

The weekly meeting of the Hogwarts staff was in the process of ending, and teachers were slowly filing out of the room. The meeting, typically, was a short affair, except for ones at the start of terms. First year student issues took up most of the time, as Jeffrey Hill (Professor of Muggle Studies) renewed his annual plea for some kind of opening week seminar for muggle born students.....so that there

wouldn't be so much culture shock. More than one of the new students this year had wound up in the Hospital Wing after panic attacks. Hill was joined in his argument this year by Professors Bliss and Shepherd, the newbies. Bliss was in favor of it because of her experience at Beauxbatons, which had a similar program. Shepherd's support was a bit harder to fathom, since he had no muggle born students in his own House. His argument was a simple 'who would it harm to have such a seminar?' Once he said that, he appeared to stop listening to the debate; logic was a Potion Master's best friend apparently. Dumbledore caved in eventually, though there wouldn't be a program this term.

Hanging back at the end of the meeting were Professors McGonagall, Hagrid, Flitwick, and Bliss: the Order members among the faculty. Dumbledore also retrieved Professor Shepherd, who was absent mindedly ambling back to his office. The Headmaster eyed Flitwick, who looked distinctly uncomfortable as he began speaking:

"On my way to our meeting, I went by the Room of Requirement, to renew the charms in place there.....only to find that they had been disturbed."

"In what ways?"

"There are a total of five listening charms in there Melissa, all five showed signs of having muting spells on them. I can tell you that there was no such disturbance this time last night, it was either done last evening or sometime today."

The teachers were contemplative for a moment, outside of Shepherd, who had a question:

"Interesting though that news is.....who cares? Why is this a concern?"

Dumbledore, for the moment, ignored Shepherd's questions as he addressed McGonagall.

"Minerva, have there been similar muting charms detected in the Gryffindor Common Room or the sixth year boys' room?"

"No there haven't been, though I have not been up there today. As far as I know the spells either haven't been found by the students.....or they've found them and are working around them. Knowing Potter it wouldn't surprise me if they've found them already, but I don't have any proof either way."

"Charles, we have the charms in place on the Room of Requirement to ensure that nothing untoward happens in there: either of the amorous nature, or of a dangerous nature. We obviously don't have the staff to monitor the charms all the time, rather they are voice activated and the sounds feed into a special pensieve that resides in my office. The charms in the Gryffindor Tower are there for a different reason, we need to keep better tabs on Mr. Potter and his friends. Before, we could count on Ms. Granger to keep us reasonably apprised of what was going on, combine that with a more cautious Mr. Potter and we didn't have to worry that much." McGonagall interrupted him at that point, something she rarely did.

"I maintain, as I have before, that you did Ms. Granger a disservice with all of those questions. All week I've noticed how alone she seems, now that Harry and Ron have split with her. Those two will never trust her as long as you and she are in the same school, and their attitude is coloring that of their housemates."

"Have there been any reprisals against her?"

"No Filius there haven't, from what I gather Harry either didn't tell them what happened, or he warned them not to do anything to her. Neville Longbottom seems to have taken her place in the 'Trio'. No one in Gryffindor is showing any hostility toward her, but neither have I seen anyone say so much as 'hello' to her."

"So Harry has taken over as the leader of Gryffindor?"

"So it would seem Albus, though it's not hard to figure out how. Ever since they formed their group last year Harry has been coming into his own, and he has subtly been using his fame to bind his Housemates to him." Bliss leaned forward and interrupted her:

"It's not just his Housemates Minerva; it's all of his year outside of the hardcore Slytherins. I've seen the way they look to him in my class, though he tries to deny it. What I'm wondering is why you seem so worried about that Albus?"

"In some ways Harry's new found confidence is a good thing, I've no doubt his magical abilities will increase significantly now that he truly believes in his destiny. We've all seen the strides made by Neville Longbottom since his confidence has increased. Harry is a similar case; he's admitted to me that he knows that he must kill Voldemort.....which is both good and bad. Good, because he can prepare for what's going to happen.....bad, because he's now willing to take advantage of his situation, in a negative way. He hasn't specifically mentioned it yet, but I fully expect him to use his 'final weapon' status by blackmailing me whenever he's in trouble or wants something I'm not willing to give."

There were nods among the old faculty, while Bliss and Shepherd remained silent. The problem in the room was clear, and it mirrored what was going on in the Order: There was no one willing to contradict Dumbledore on most issues, at least out loud. Bliss privately thought that the Headmaster was more interested in protecting his own power base inside the Order, and was blaming Harry needlessly. She was very impressed with the young man, and to a certain extent had fallen under his spell. Bliss had told Harry the truth on Tuesday: she was a very reluctant member of the Order. It wasn't that she didn't believe in the war, she just had a problem with how Dumbledore was fighting it.....or not fighting it. Melissa was a believer in offense over defense, and the old man was 'fighting' a purely defensive war thus far. True, he had had way too many problems just getting people to acknowledge Voldemort's return, but that problem was in the past now.....but Dumbledore was acting in the same way as he had before, as if nothing had changed.

Meanwhile, Shepherd was bored senseless whenever talk of the war came up. He knew that he would prosper whichever way it turned out, though he felt things would be calmer with Voldemort at least contained. Charles knew how to use his wand quite well, and had even taken up muggle judo, as a stress outlet.....but he often needed Melissa to remind him that there was any danger at all. Their

friendship had been longstanding, and he just accepted whatever she said about the war as gospel and then stopped thinking about it. He had nothing against Harry at all, indeed he shared his contempt for all things Malfoy, a prime reason that he hadn't interfered with him on the platform. He wasn't comfortable contradicting Dumbledore in front of other people yet, but he knew that would change eventually; he certainly planned to tell him that he should worry more about educating these children, than in the intrigues of teenage kids, whatever blackmail they might be capable of. In fact, perhaps now was a good time to say something....he didn't need this job nearly as much as it needed him.

"So what do you suggest then Albus? If the kid has the goods on you the way you say he does, I don't see how there's anything you can do. He can always just refuse to cooperate when the time comes, and you can't afford that. Plus, and correct me if I'm wrong.....what has he done that's so wrong? He got his freedom from relatives who hated him, is that bad? Snape was fired, after he attacked him, how was that Harry's fault? He wants total control of his Defense group, a group he never should have had to start in the first place, but did so on his own initiative, with very positive results. What has he done that's so wrong? If the kid was plotting to become the next Dark Lord I could see what all this fuss is about, but all I see is a young man who is quite justifiably paranoid.....a paranoia that you have fostered Albus. Add to that his behaving like....I don't know....a teenager? Who would have thought that could happen?"

This was by far the longest stretch of words that anyone in room (besides Melissa) had ever heard Charles say in mixed company, including his time as a student (the older faculty had all taught him). Dumbledore flinched visibly at hearing words that Remus and Arthur Weasley, in particular, had been using on him recently. There also was an echo of Harry's own words, even though Harry and Charles had only met for a brief moment. Dumbledore knew, rationally, that a Harry led takeover of the Order wasn't going to happen. The only members of it that were openly pro-Harry were Remus and the Weasleys, and even they only argued with him when it came to dealing with Harry issues. Another factor was that it is hard to take over an organization that you want little part of to begin with, and that

fit Harry perfectly. Maybe he was being overly sensitive about what the lad was doing, that did bear more thought.

"Perhaps you're right Charles, maybe we are doing more to drive Harry away than we ought (Bliss and Shepherd rolled their eyes at the 'we' part of it, but Dumbledore didn't notice that). I still believe that the listening charms are a good idea, but we won't do anything else to try and monitor him. Hopefully the bonds of trust with Harry can be rebuilt, or at the very least not sundered any more than they already are."

"On one last matter: Charles, are there many rumblings in your House, either pro-Light or pro-Dark?"

"Neither that I can tell, openly anyway. No one has come to me with any concerns so far.....which is to be expected, given that I'm new and not yet trusted within the House. Undoubtedly Draco Malfoy and his cronies are all dark, just as Blaise Zabini and friends are not. The battle will be for students in the middle, the first tell tale sign will be a week from today when Harry's Defense Association meets for the first time. How many of my Slytherins will show up? That's the question; I'll certainly encourage anyone who wants to go."

"Thank you for your assessment Charles, now let us all get to dinner. It would not do for the students to see all of us absent from the meal."

The teachers all headed toward the Great Hall, though Bliss and Shepherd walked more slowly.

"What do you think that was all about Melissa? Why are those people so worried?"

"I'm beginning to regret talking us into taking these jobs Charles; this is more than just Dumbledore v. Voldemort. You talked of Harry's paranoia, to me its Dumbledore who's chasing at shadows."

"We had to take them, you know that. I'm not saying we were the last options, but c'mon.....my only worry was that since Dumbledore has such a dismal track record with hiring, we would be tarred by that

same brush before we even got here. That aside though, I wonder what those muting charms were all about.”

“I’m sure it was some sort of clandestine meeting of Harry and his inner group. The leaders span all the Houses, so there’s not one Common Room they can meet in and still have secrecy. I’d bet all the galleons in both our vaults that Harry found the listening charms in his room, that’s why they muted them right away in the Room of Requirement....because they knew to look for them in the first place.”

“Dumbledore either overestimates the kid, or he underestimates him. I loved the way Hagrid, Flitwick, and McGonagall just nodded their heads at whatever he said, not a lot of wise counsel coming from them. Makes one wonder why Harry wanted Flitwick as the advisor to his DA.”

“That was in case I proved incompetent of course. When I talked to him I could tell that the kid wanted to like me, he just didn’t dare. Plus, Flitwick is a known quantity, better to have a known spy in your midst than one you’re not sure of.”

“What are we going to do about this? We’ve got a paranoid Headmaster, a sycophant staff, other than us, and the most powerful sixteen year old wizard on the planet.....all on a collision course. That doesn’t even take into account the likely civil war in Slytherin that’s going to spring up any day now. I’d bet that same money we’re going to have at least one student in my House killed before 1996 is over.”

“If push comes to shove Charles, and we have to declare sides between Harry and Dumbledore, where do you come out?”

“I don’t know Melissa, but we’d better start opening a dialogue with Harry’s side just in case. I’ve heard rumblings that Peter Tyson is one of Harry’s advisors, are you still on good terms with his wife?”

“They’re more than rumblings; he’s the one who came up with the plan to set up Snape. Jennifer and I were roommates for seven years; I haven’t seen her in awhile though.”

"Use her as a conduit and set up a meeting with Peter and Bill Weasley. I'm not saying that we should turn spies ourselves.....but we need to have the kid thinking well of us in any case. It's best not to approach Harry directly, at least not right away. I'm sure he'll be wary of the new teachers all of a sudden wanting to be his friends."

"Good idea, we can't stay out of the fight for very long if one erupts. I'm leaning toward Harry myself; I just don't have a lot of faith in Dumbledore's ability to fight a war."

"I wonder if that's why Voldemort is being so quiet, you think he's letting Dumbledore and Harry go at it on purpose?"

"Could be Charles, could be. We'd better get on to dinner, I'll owl Jennifer afterwards."

They picked up their walking pace and soon entered the Great Hall.

### Harry's Trunk

9 pm

Harry, Ron, Neville, and Bill sat around the coffee table in Harry's living room, finishing up their pizza. The three boys had skipped dinner in order to spend time with Bill and the other graduates (the twins, Angelina, and Alicia, who were now in the twins' trunk doing heaven knows what). Luna and Ginny were off studying in Luna's trunk, their classes were already heavy with homework, in preparation for OWLs; not to mention their greater number of classes (nine for Ginny, whose extra classes were Creatures and Ancient Runes; and ten for Luna) than the boys. Bill's girlfriend was back in the United States visiting her family, so it was bachelor night. Neville was still single, but had been getting increased intention from the girls as a result of his presence in the new 'Trio'. It hadn't hurt that he had lost a lot of weight over the summer, and gained muscle. He still couldn't be called handsome, but his reflected glow off of Harry seemed to make up for that.

"Harry, Ron, I wanted to wait until the others went away before I brought this up. How have things been with Hermione? I know you guys had the 'talk' with her, what has been the aftermath?"

"Nothing spectacular really, I don't think any of us have exchanged even one word with her." Harry looked at Ron and Neville for confirmation and they each nodded.

"By 'us' do you mean the three of you, or the House in general?" Ron answered him:

"I've seen some of the first years asking her questions, but the rest of the House seems to be following our lead. Katie and I spread the word that she wasn't to be trusted with any DA stuff, and I guess the rest of the House went a bit more thorough than that. No one seems to be harassing her...yet. I know that Malfoy must have picked up on it by now, so it's only a matter of time."

"You're going to protect her from Malfoy, right?"

The other two looked at Harry, and no one spoke right away. Bill got a vague sense of disquiet as he watched them; this was more serious than he thought.

"Bill.....I'm not sure what to do about that. Ginny is of the opinion that we should take her at her word and leave her to her own devices. That's what Hermione said Bill, twice. It's been driving me crazy for years about people not respecting my wishes, and protecting me with measures I'm not comfortable with.....I don't want to appear to be a hypocrite here."

"I understand the logic in that, but you can't abandon her to the wolves."

"I don't think Malfoy has the stones to go after her, at least not directly. He knows that whatever he does to her we'll retaliate harshly. That's part of the reason I did what I did on the platform, to send him a message that the gloves are off this year. If he is dumb enough to do anything, we'll very quietly get revenge for her, but I don't think we should do anything too overt. Bill, if your sister had her way we'd be

doing the hexing, not Malfoy. She's really taking this personally, its been all that we, and Dean, can do to calm her down about it."

Bill wasn't terribly satisfied with that answer, but he let it go for the time being. Of the entire inner circle, Bill had the most sympathy for Hermione's new situation. He didn't in the least condone what she'd done, but he didn't want revenge like Ginny did. He privately wondered when Harry would let Ginny do as she wanted, he felt it was inevitable given the pressure she was putting on him. Ron and Neville's reticence hadn't gone unnoticed by Bill either; Hermione's only ally in this seemed to be Harry's wish to be consistent. As the evening ended, he prepared to leave the trunk; there were things he needed to take care of with the twins before he headed home. Ron and Neville were going up the ladder to the entrance as Harry touched his arm, pausing him.

"You're going to fix up Angelina and Alicia before you go home, right?"

"Don't worry Harry; I'll do just enough Obliviating so that they don't remember the trunk floo or how they got here."

"It's not that I don't trust them....."

"But you don't trust anyone." Bill finished for him.

"Not quite, the list is a very small one though. We can't risk anyone out of our inner circle learning about them. The twins have assured me that they'll honor that, whatever they may be up to with the girls right now."

"And what about me Harry? I'm not a trunk owner, am I going to get a memory charm, courtesy of Fred or George?"

Harry looked at Bill and smiled faintly, quietly he said:

"No brother, I'm not worried about you at all." Harry left, and after a moment's pause, Bill did the same.

Slytherin Common Room

Blaise Zabini sat over by the corner fire place, doing his Arithmancy homework. He was careful not to have his back completely to the rest of the room, but otherwise he wasn't worried about being attacked right then and there. Blaise had always had an uneasy truce going on with his roommates, going back to first year. He had been as surprised as anyone when he'd been sorted into Slytherin. His brothers, twins Henri and Pascal, were thought to be aberrations when they'd been sorted into Slytherin, but they were not. He'd fully expected to go into Ravenclaw, but instead was shunted into a room with Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott. Nott was the only one of the four that Blaise ever could really abide, and now that was even gone. Malfoy was too power hungry for his tastes, and he wasn't sure if he could take two more years of his bragging about his family. Crabbe and Goyle weren't quite as stupid as they appeared to be, but they did Malfoy's bidding just as their fathers did with Lucius. Nott had been the quiet one until last year, when Umbridge made Potter hating an official sport at Hogwarts.

Blaise's brothers were now graduated from Hogwarts and working in the family business, which wasn't good for him. His brothers had been no small amount of protection and reassurance during his first five years, and their leaving coupled with his new alliance with Harry Potter was quite worrisome. Harry's overtures on the train had rocked him, but what was more shocking is how little they had surprised Daphne. She explained to him afterward that she'd been expecting such a meeting, her only qualification is that she'd figured on the approach coming from Granger, not Harry. Such a method wouldn't have sold him on the idea though, Harry was dead right in his belief that Hermione was a turn-off to other Houses. Blaise acknowledged Granger's brains, and to an extent her guts, but her personality grated on him. Her absence had made his quiet recruiting pitch to the younger Slytherins an easier sell, and he'd lined up six of the fourth and fifth year boys to attend next week's meeting. He deliberately picked those who either had few or no past Slytherin family ties, ones that Malfoy had been a jerk to. Daphne and Tracey had had similar success on the girls, and they had seven students prepared to attend the meeting, including their fellow sixth year Mary Sweet, who would undoubtedly be able to pick up a few more because of her friendships

with the younger years. Together with Daphne and Tracey he had done a rough breakdown, and of the 63 students in Slytherin:

Pro-Light: 22 students

Pro-Dark 24 students

Uncertain: 9 students

First years: 8 students

The first years he discounted because no one had had a chance to get to know them yet. He thought of those numbers and remembered a quote his father had told him, from a muggle sport's coach "There are ten guys on this team who like me, ten who hate me, and five who aren't sure; my sole goal as a manager is to keep the five who aren't sure away from the ten who hate me." Blaise was pretty sure about the twenty two students in the light column, and even more sure about the twenty four in the dark one; the nine in the uncertain column were ones that none of the three of them could peg with any remote certainty. Seventeen students would decide the balance of power within Slytherin House. Daphne and Tracey had been working with the first years, showing them around and helping them get used to their classes. This was work that the Prefects should have been doing, and were doing in the other three Houses, but Slytherin Prefects had always held themselves above such petty assignments and it was left to others to do that. The three of them had easily put all six Prefects into the Pro-Dark category; thank goodness none of them were Head Boy or Girl this year.

Malfoy and Parkinson had been allowed to keep their Prefect positions, to little surprise among the House. Most of the students figured that Malfoy senior had intimidated the Board into keeping Draco and Pansy on, and the two of them did little to correct this notion. Blaise and his allies knew the real story, with Blaise's father and Daphne's uncle each on the Wizengamot and the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Potter had added details to this, and they had quietly circulated that news to the Pro-Light students. Dumbledore's stupidity amazed Blaise, allowing those two to keep their authority within Slytherin was making his job much, much

harder.....particularly since he knew that he would have been Malfoy's replacement, and Daphne likely would have been Pansy's.

Speak of the devil; Malfoy was approaching Blaise's spot. There was no Crabbe or Goyle in sight, and Blaise knew that Nott was in the library. Daphne and Tracey noticed this from the other side of the room, where they were playing cards, each of them quietly slipped their wands into their hands.

"Zabini, how's it going?"

"Fine Malfoy, just finishing homework for Vector. What's on your mind?"

"I think it's high time that we had a chat Zabini, I need to know where things stand with you."

"Stand as far as what Malfoy? Why don't you tell me exactly what you're talking about?"

"Nott and I have been talking this week, we want you with us Blaise, we want you to join us and serve Lord Voldemort."

Blaise kept his face as calm as possible, he even produced a small smile. Trust Malfoy to be this direct, though the timing was a bit odd. Blaise had been expecting such an overture ever since Umbridge took over Hogwarts last year, but he had been left alone (and not invited to join her goon squad). Shepherd had not been entirely truthful with Dumbledore during the staff meeting; Blaise had already approached his Head of House and gotten his assurance that he would be protected in the event that something like this happened. There was some kind of animus between the Shepherds and the Malfoys, though the Professor hadn't gone into many details. He had spoken with his father as well, in Hogsmeade briefly the day before (he had used the pickup Quidditch game as a distraction and just wandered out the front gate), they had agreed that supporting Potter was the best play they could make.....especially given the dislike between him and Dumbledore.

"That's interesting Draco, tell me more. Why are you making this offer now?"

"Snape not being here has changed things; the new Potions Professor is Dumbledore's man.....Dumbledore's spy. He cannot be trusted, even if he's a Slytherin alumnus. Nott feels you can be counted on, so I'll be straight with you Blaise. I'm assuming you know that my father has been arrested?"

"Yes, so my father told me. No trial appears imminent either from what he says. Isn't Voldemort going to break him out of prison?"

"He will once we have the manpower to take it over, he hasn't told me his plans obviously; there's little our fool of a Headmaster can get if he questions me."

"I like Dumbledore even less than you do Draco, but he's no fool, he's dangerous. I have no interest in helping Dumbledore mind you, but tell me why I should help anyone in this war? The Zabinis didn't get involved last time and I don't see why we should this time either."

"We're going to win Blaise, that's why. This time the war is going to be serious; hardcore.....everyone will need to choose sides. Look at who you'll have to choose from: Dumbledore or Fudge.....please. An old man who is losing his grip on both his faculties and his own people, and an incompetent bungler who Dumbledore won't allow to be replaced because he's afraid that someone talented might go into the office." Blaise interrupted him:

"What about Potter then, I'm hearing that he and the old man are on the outs. I'm seeing him as a side that one can choose.....he's certainly more palatable than Fudge or Dumbledore." In his mind Blaise was wondering just how far he could take this, and whether Draco would be fool enough to actually give him any real information. He was a bit sad to have confirmed for him that Theo had gone all the way over, but it wasn't unexpected. This was either Draco trying to smoke him out as a Potter supporter, or the guy really had no clue about his loyalties.

"Potter.....Potter is a special case. My Master doesn't feel that he'll support either side just yet, so he doesn't have to be worried about right now. I'm under instructions not to do any harm to him for the time being.....though Granger is another story; I can't wait to catch her alone on one of her Prefect patrols."

Blaise needed every ounce of self-control not to start screaming "WHAT?!!?" when he heard the part about not harming Potter.

"That's interesting Draco, very interesting. Of course I won't violate your confidence, or blab what you've told me. I'd like some time to think about your offer if you don't mind."

"What if I said that you had to decide now? Come on Blaise, you must have known this was coming eventually, I'm sure you've thought about what you'd do. You know that if you choose Dumbledore we can make things very hard for you here."

"Now, now Draco, that's not very smart of you. You were doing great until that, you actually managed to be halfway pleasant for a change. Threatening me will not get you anywhere Draco, the side I pick will be because I believe in it, not because I'm afraid of it. I'm not going to join Dumbledore, that I can promise you.....but neither am I going to pick a side without talking it over with my father and brothers. The thing is, and I know this is going to be hard to believe.....but I don't trust you. What if I told you that I want a show of good faith from you in exchange for even considering this?"

"Such as.....?"

"Let me think about it Draco, and I'll get back to you."

Malfoy reached into his pocket and appeared to squeeze something. Crabbe and Goyle emerged from their dorm room and went right for Blaise and Draco. While Blaise's attention was on them, Draco drew his wand and pointed it at him.

"Sorry Blaise, but that's not good for me. We need to know right now, and we're the ones who will need a gesture of good faith from you."

Blaise saw Daphne and Tracey moving up behind the boys, and saw Mary slip out the door, hopefully to go get Shepherd. For some reason that he couldn't fathom at the moment, Crabbe and Goyle didn't have their wands out, they were just cracking their knuckles. He mocked Malfoy with a smile; his own wand was easily within reach.

"Such as.....?"

"Maybe I'll have you kill Granger, while I watch of course; we wouldn't want my hands to get dirty now would we?"

"Certainly not Draco, though why you're so afraid of Granger is a bit puzzling. Surely she's not a threat now that Potter has gotten rid of her?"

"She's Mudblood scum, and she deserves to die for that alone. She's been a thorn in my side for five long years, and you're going to take care of her for me.....or we'll deal with you."

"You shoot one spell at me and you'll open up a firestorm that you don't want Malfoy. Put your wand down and let's talk about this like reasonable people." Blaise was just trying to waste as much time as possible, hopefully Mary would find Shepherd quickly. The last thing he wanted was a battle right there in the Common Room.....if for no other reason than he wasn't sure if he could win it. Blaise was a thinker, not a fighter, and he took Malfoy's fighting abilities very seriously. Draco paused for a moment, all the moment that was needed.

"I believe I've gotten the answer I was looking for Zabini, it's too bad really." Crabbe and Goyle advanced forward and started to reach for Blaise. Malfoy wasn't opening his mouth to voice any spells, this was just going to be a fist pounding apparently. Crabbe had just made contact with Blaise's robes when Professor Shepherd walked into the room, followed by a clearly out of breath Mary. He took immediate stock of the situation and pulled out his wand.

"What is going on here? Vincent, let go of his robes, now."

Crabbe complied without thinking, earning him a sneer from Malfoy. Malfoy turned to look at his Head of House, and gave him his best superior smile.

"Oh nothing much really sir, just a small difference of opinion between Zabini and myself. We were just working it out when you came in."

"Yes, I saw as much. Blaise is that what was happening?"

The entire room hushed as they waited for Blaise to answer, no one was even pretending not to listen to every word being said.

"No sir, Malfoy was inviting me to join Voldemort, and when I didn't say yes he tried to harm me. Crabbe and Goyle were about to do something when you came in."

"That is a lie Zabini and you know it. Sir, this is just between us, I suggest you let us handle it ourselves."

"I'll take your suggestion under advisement Draco. Ok, the rest of you continue what you were doing before. I want all of the sixth year students to accompany me to my office now. Malcolm (he pointed at third year student Malcolm Baddock), please go retrieve Theodore Nott, I saw him in the library about fifteen minutes ago, he should still be there." He motioned for the others to precede him, and he walked behind them, watching very closely for any wands or sudden movements.

They soon arrived at his office, which was decorated no differently than Snape had had it. He pointed them to sit down, and they waited for Theo Nott to arrive. When he did, Shepherd dismissed Baddock, and got up to address his students.

"OK, it doesn't take a genius, which I am, to figure out what was about to happen. I'm aware that tensions are high all over the school, and that the 'war', if you want to call it that, is causing people to take sides. Now I can tolerate differences of opinion, I can tolerate arguments or harsh words.....but what I will not tolerate is physical violence between members of our House. That is not simply my view, it is the law in our House. Now I have my differences with Snape, but

he was right in one area: We stick together, and we do not harm our own. The sticking together isn't going to happen, I'm not that naïve.....but no wand is to be drawn, nor any punch thrown at any member of Slytherin by anyone in our House. Am I in any way unclear on that?"

"Sir, we don't want Zabini as our roommate any longer, he's a traitor to our House.....he's not even a real Slytherin, the Sorting Hat must have been joking."

"I was just sitting there minding my own business Professor; I've never tried to interfere with whatever ridiculousness my roommates have been up to. I'm as much a Slytherin as anyone in there, but I never signed on to taking orders from Malfoy."

"Well we seem to have an impasse here, let us see just how bad it is. Blaise, go over to the left; Draco, to the right." Confused, the two boys did as instructed. Shepherd looked at the remaining eight students in the room, it was dawning on them what he was doing. "OK, now I want all of you to declare, right now. I want each one of you to join either Blaise or Draco. If you genuinely don't have a preference, stay seated where you are. Do it now."

There was no hesitation among any of them as they all stood up and moved to the two sides of the room. Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode joined Malfoy; Greengrass, Davis, and Sweet joined Zabini. There were no surprises for Blaise; he was comforted by the fact that it was only six to four against him.

"Good, at least everyone is sure. I want one thing to be clear: Blaise, your group is not to harm anyone in Draco's group, and vice versa. If so much as one bruise appears on anyone in here, I'll put everyone on the other side under Veritaserum and question them to my heart's content.....and who knows what I might find. Therefore, you are all dependant upon each other. I will be repeating this warning to the other years, so don't get them to do any of your dirty work. I don't care what you people do to each other outside of Hogwarts, but nothing is to happen inside this castle. Am I understood?"

They all nodded, even Malfoy was somewhat impressed with decisiveness of his Professor. Blaise was relieved that Shepherd had done a lot of his work for him; he was assuming that Shepherd was going to be separating out each year as he had done with them. He then proceeded to confirm this.

"Theodore, to your knowledge are there any other Slytherins in the library at this time?"

"I don't believe so Professor, the only ones I saw in there were a few Ravenclaws and Granger."

"Excellent. Mary, I would like you to go fetch Professor Bliss, then I want you to collect all the seventh year students and bring them here. The rest of you will proceed to the Potion's classroom where you will wait while I give my speech and warning to the other six years, each in turn. I'm isolating you because I don't want any lobbying of the younger years before I have a chance to talk with them. I'm not going to take your wands, but I'll have our Defense teacher keep watch over you. It's not that I don't trust you kids.....well, yes it is. Blaise, during my talks with the other years I will find you a place to sleep, it's obvious that you cannot remain in your current room. Mary, please go now."

She left the room and returned in a few minutes with Professor Bliss. Shepherd explained the situation to her, and aside from some raised eyebrows she didn't make any comments. Melissa was impressed by her friend's actions; clearly a crisis brought him out of the academic fog that inhabited him most of the time. She left with the sixth year students and followed them to the Potion's classroom.

Charles spent the next hour with each of the remaining years of his House. He gave them his 'hands off' lecture, and told them to take sides, even the first years. Only four students, all in the first two years, refused to take a side.....and surprisingly not one of the 63 students objected to being told to choose. Charles' breakdown went as follows:

Blaise: 28 students

Draco: 31 students

Nobody: 4 students

After all the talks were done, Charles went to the Potions Classroom and told everyone to go back to bed. He held Blaise back, ostensibly to tell him about his new living arrangements. He and Melissa, without talking with each other, threw a Silencing Charm at the door.

"Now Blaise, we have to make this quick, I don't want to arouse any suspicions among your enemies. I.....we, want you to tell Harry that we're on your side and we're willing to cooperate with your group up to a point. I did what I did to smoke out just who stood where among our students, and as an excuse to get you out of your room (he handed Blaise a sheet of parchment with his loyalty numbers on it). I have to remain impartial for appearances sake, but I don't want Malfoy to get too strong a hold in there."

"Yes sir, and thank you for what you're doing. I'll tell Harry what you said; I can tell you that he's said nice things about both of you. Daphne, Tracey and I aren't just figurehead members of the group either, Harry really means to include all of the Houses."

"That's good to hear, Professor Bliss and I are arranging a meeting with Harry's advisors, I'm sure he'll be hearing all about it tomorrow. I've arranged for you to sleep in the fourth year boys' room for the duration of the year; only one of them, Trevor Miller, declared for Malfoy and he's agreed to switch with you. He has no more desire to be isolated in his dorm room than you do. Now let's get going back to your room, I'll escort you myself to make sure there are no more incidents. Professor Bliss, thank you for your assistance, it's much appreciated."

Saturday, September 14, 1996

Harry got out of bed early and let loose a huge yawn. He put on his muggle workout clothes and slowly walked outside, where Justin and Anthony were to be waiting for their morning run. This had been suggested by Bliss at their Tuesday class, that each student should begin some sort of physical fitness regimen. Bliss herself was a

devotee of yoga, and combined with a super fast metabolism, it kept her in shape. Physical fitness was, by and large, frowned upon in the wizarding world as a waste of time. Bliss thought this was crazy, in an extended duel the level of stamina that each fighter possessed would be a key factor. Justin had suggested to Harry he run with him in the mornings, and Harry thought it was a great idea. Anthony overheard them talking and asked to join them; now the three Muggle born/raised students jogged every morning at 7:00 am, for about 40 minutes each time. Ron and Neville had looked at Harry like he was crazy, and flatly refused to cut into their sleep like that.....nor was Seamus a running type. Dean said, with a smile, that he had his own workout routine, after which Ron started to go after him, but was restrained by Seamus. Harry quietly told Dean what he'd told Ginny, if Ron ever caught them, he wouldn't interfere in the slightest.

Katie had surprised all of them by announcing on Tuesday that Quidditch tryouts were to be held today. She explained during her announcement that the Chasers, of which two more were needed, would need all the time they could get to mesh. She further surprised the House by saying that all positions would be open again, including hers. Everyone would have to try out for their jobs, even Harry. Her public rationale was that there was a need for a Reserve team this year, given that three of the players were in their final years, and two more in their sixth year; they couldn't afford to be caught short in future seasons. She said that if she didn't open all the positions, there likely wouldn't be any future Seekers-to-be, or Keepers, or Beaters.

Privately Katie told Harry (and only Harry) that another factor was that she wanted to replace Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper as Beaters, if possible.....and that Geoffrey Hooper had asked to try out for Keeper again. It seemed that Angelina had told him at the end of the previous year that his attitude alone was what made her choose Ron over him, that he had had the better performance at tryouts. Hooper had taken that and gone to McGonagall in an effort to at least get a tryout opportunity, if not to actually replace Ron without one. McGonagall had talked to Katie about this, and suggested that she open all the positions up.....though McGonagall assured her of course that the decisions of who to pick for the team would lie with Katie alone. Katie told Harry that while it didn't sound exactly like an

order, it was framed as ‘you had better have a good reason not to do it that I’m not thinking of.’

Harry didn’t like the sound of this, but agreed after much prodding not to tell Ron ahead of time about these developments.....a promise that lasted approximately two hours, after which he told Ron the whole story. He regretted going back on his word (though he rationalized it by thinking that he never said the words ‘I promise’ to Katie), but Ron had backed him time and time again over the last couple of months, and he owed Ron far more than he did Katie. He wanted Ron to know primarily so that he would take the tryouts seriously, and not just rest on his laurels, thinking that his heroics against Ravenclaw would grease him through. Ron took the news surprisingly well, continuing his rapid maturation in Harry’s eyes. He had watched Hooper pretty carefully during the tryouts the previous year and agreed that he was pretty good, though not so good that this should happen. Ron was of the opinion that Hooper should just wait his turn and take the job over in his fifth year (Hooper was currently a third year) like he himself had, waiting for Wood to graduate. Harry didn’t disagree with that, but there was nothing to be done but win the position at the tryouts again, he felt sure that if it was close Katie would choose the veteran. They agreed that Harry would work Ron out during the week to help him (Ginny also joined in).....though not before Harry sent a Howler to Angelina for being so stupid.

At the front doors he met up with Anthony and they walked over to the Quidditch Pitch, where they found Justin there talking with Blaise. Harry remembered that he had mentioned the running to Blaise during the week, but hadn’t actually expected him to join them. Harry and Blaise had talked a lot over the last week, the story of the lines being drawn in Slytherin House had been all over school Monday morning. Harry was impressed with the skill with which Blaise had forced the issue without a resulting battle, and aghast at some of the things that Malfoy had let slip.....or had he let them slip? Was Malfoy just disseminating some false information in the hopes of Harry letting down his guard? Harry had no problem taking the Hermione threats seriously, and asked Professor Bliss to warn Hermione about them. He did this in part to keep himself at a distance from Hermione, so she wouldn’t think he was interfering with

her life. The reason he chose Bliss was to further bind her to his side, after what Blaise told him about his meeting with her and Shepherd. He had gotten word from Peter as well about their overtures, which both pleased him and made him suspicious. They were due to meet with Bill and Peter this evening for dinner in Hogsmeade, a meeting that Harry was planning to eavesdrop on, hidden in his Invisibility Cloak. He had arranged for Bill to be carrying the twins' trunk, so he wouldn't have to use the Honeydukes passage. Harry had it in the back of his mind to send one of the Creeveys on a test run of that passage, to see if it was now inoperable, or had some kind of alarm or tracking charm on it. It would take a Creevey to do it, since they worshipped Harry so much that they wouldn't mind getting into trouble. Harry didn't like how his mind worked that way sometimes, taking advantage of the poor kids like that, but he made a mental note to talk it over with Ron and Neville.

The four of them started on their run, of necessity going a bit slower today for Blaise's benefit. They chatted idly throughout the run, though not about anything important. After it was over, Harry decided to skip breakfast in the Great Hall, and invited his jogging mates down into his trunk for some of Winky's omelets, Quidditch tryouts were at 2:00 pm and he needed to relax. Harry had a bit more modesty than most 16 year old icons, but he knew that his job wasn't in jeopardy, particularly since Ginny had no interest in it. The four of them trooped up to Gryffindor Tower, and upon their entrance into the Common Room there were a few gasps.....obviously the gasps weren't for Anthony or Justin. There weren't that many people in the Common Room at 8:00 am, but those that were there were treated to a sight that hadn't happened in decades.

"My, my.....Hell must have frozen over, a Slytherin in the Gryffindor Common Room."

Ron said this with a big grin, which took any insult away. He and Neville (both still in their PJ's and yawning a lot) greeted the three non-Gryffindors warmly, as all three of them looked around. Blaise plopped down on one of the sofas and smiled with satisfaction.

"How much of Malfoy's fortune would he trade away to be where I am right now? In all the time I've been here I've had a few weird moments: this tops them all."

After seeing how friendly the Trio was being to Blaise, a few other Gryffindors, younger students all, greeted him. Blaise was already a minor legend inside of Hogwarts, for standing up to Malfoy and showing that all Slytherins weren't evil. This was the first chance a lot of the younger Gryffindors had to see him up close. Harry motioned for his friends to follow him upstairs, where his House Elves were preparing breakfast in the trunk. Blaise, Justin, and Anthony were duly impressed with Harry's apartment, and soon the six of them were feasting on omelets, fruit salad, and orange juice. They discussed the upcoming tryouts for all the Quidditch teams (only Neville and Blaise weren't players), and what Bliss and Shepherd were likely to want to talk about that night.

Ron and Justin thought that their approach was a hair too convenient, given that none of the other teachers would have any credibility with such a proposal. Blaise was adamant however in his belief that Bliss and Shepherd were the real article; Shepherd especially had gone quite far out on a limb to prove himself. Anthony felt that Dumbledore wouldn't be quite so obvious as to send them in like that, even as just a probe. Harry told them of his 'wait and see' attitude toward them, though he said he was inclined to agree with Anthony that the old man wasn't dumb enough to try and alienate Harry any more than he already had.

Blaise told them that it was 'so far so good' in Slytherin since Shepherd's warnings. It was odd, he said, rooming with boys two years his junior.....but they were at least nice fellows, and he could relax in his own room in a way that he never had with Malfoy and company. Every night he put an alarm charm on his dorm room door, just in case someone tried to violate the deal, but nothing had happened yet. The sixth year girls had quickly reached a silent treatment kind of arrangement, with Parkinson and Bulstrode pretending that the other three didn't exist. The seventh years, all eleven of them, were to a person on Malfoy's side, but were too busy with NEWTs to do much terrorizing. Still, Blaise said that his real worry was that if a battle really did happen in there, his side would be

seriously outgunned (over half of Malfoy's coalition, 16 of 31, came from the two uppermost years).

As everyone was leaving, Harry pulled Anthony aside and asked how things were going for Luna with her roommates. Of course she was saying that everything was fine, but Harry thought that that might just be Luna being Luna and sloughing it off. He felt that Anthony would be straight with him, since he was the Ravenclaw boy that he spent the most time with. His fears were unjustified however, as Anthony told him that all was quiet. Apparently Lisa and Mandy had placed a couple of listening charms of their own, to make sure nothing untoward happened. Nothing much was going on there, except for that a couple of the fifth year girls were a little jealous at all the friendliness shown Luna by the sixth years, and of her relationship with Harry. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard this, nothing to worry about. He well knew that Luna could take care of herself, but he didn't want her to have to do so all the time. He rationalized his protective streak by the fact that Luna not only knew what he was doing, but didn't seem to mind.

A little bit before 2:00 pm, Harry, Ron, and Ginny walked brooms in hand, toward the Quidditch Pitch. Ron was muttering to himself to stay focused, he had somehow managed not to give away to Katie during the week that he knew his position was in jeopardy. Katie was already there, with a notebook and pen in hand. There was quite a crowd gathering, this was the first mass Quidditch tryout in six years; that was the year before Harry started Hogwarts, and was when Fred, George, Angelina, and Alicia had made the team, after another mass exodus of veteran players. Since then the only tryouts of any kind had been last year for Keeper, and the ones held on the fly after Harry and the twins were banned. Katie separated out the potential players from the spectators, and there were twenty two people wanting to tryout.

Aside from Harry, there was only one other person there for seeker: Natalie McDonald, a third year girl. She told Katie upfront that she didn't think she could beat Harry this year, but she wanted to be on the Reserve team so that she would be the heir apparent. She seemed like a nice girl, so Harry promised to work with her during the season. Likewise, there were only two people there for Keeper: Ron

and Geoffrey Hooper. Ron limited himself to throwing a dirty look at Hooper, but didn't say anything to him. Six students were there for Beater, incumbents Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke, and four new players, which included Seamus. Seamus was there on a whim, during the pickup Quidditch game the previous week he had been pressed into service as a Beater and he'd had a great time swinging the bat; he figured what the heck, why not try out? Twelve people were there for Chaser, including Katie (no one rationally thought that she wouldn't pick herself for the team), Ginny, and Dean.....who wasn't a great player, but wanted the chance to possibly fly with his girlfriend.

Seeker was first, as Katie went through the motions of having a tryout for that position. The first exercise was a simple race, from one set of goals to another. Natalie was flying with a Nimbus 2000, Harry with his Firebolt. Needless to say it wasn't much of a contest, but Natalie did pretty well considering. Katie had them do a few dives, and then released the snitch. The snitch wasn't in a good mood, and made Harry work for about ten minutes before he got it. Natalie never really got close, because Harry decided to see exactly what she could do and played her like he would Cho (just rough enough not to hurt her). When they got to the ground, Katie announced the obvious, that Harry had made the first team, with Natalie on the reserves.

Beater was second, and the first part involved a bit of sacrifice on the parts of Natalie and Harry, as they were the targets. The Beater hopefuls were told to whack the bludgers at them just as they might in a game. Natalie got grazed a few times, but never full on hit; Harry had two bludgers hit his robes, but he emerged unscathed. He realized that this was necessary, but it wasn't his favorite part of the tryouts. The second stage involved randomly pairing off the Beaters, and putting two pairs in the air at one time, and having each team try and unseat the other. Seamus particularly excelled in that exercise, and almost killed Jack Sloper when a bludger he hit came within inches of his temple, nailing him in the ear. Sloper somehow managed to hang on and not fall off though, impressing the crowd of onlookers. When it was all over, Katie chose Seamus and Jack as the first team, with Andrew Kirke and Michael Leach (a fourth year) as the reserves. Jack got the nod over Andrew because of his

toughness, Katie said.....but she made clear that this was a fluid placement, and practice would decide the final Beater lineup.

Keeper was next, and was combined with the Chaser trials. Katie asked Harry to help her judge the candidates for Chaser, as she would be in the air a good deal of the time. Katie separated the Chaser candidates into four groups of three, and had them first practice passing the Quaffle back and forth. Then she sent Ron up to the Keeper spot and had the players try to score on him. They went up in their groups of three, and she alternated Ron with Geoffrey. After a few runs of this, one bludger was released, and two beaters went into the air; their objective was simply to fire at the Chasers. Unfortunately this group of Chasers could charitably be described as terrible. Even Ginny wasn't very good overall, she was a very good flyer, but had trouble passing the quaffle (hitting a moving target), though she could shoot on goal quite well. In desperation, Katie had Harry and Natalie take a turn at Chaser.....unfortunately they scored more goals than everyone else, aside from Katie. Harry in particular took great pleasure in scoring on Geoffrey. The Keepers were mostly even, with Ron stopping more shots than Geoffrey, who made some pretty spectacular saves. Katie called a halt to the tryout and huddled with Harry to talk about who should get chosen.

"Could they have been any worse Harry? I mean I'm half tempted to have you play Chaser and put Ginny back at Seeker. I know that wouldn't be too smart overall, but good grief, they're all bad.....except for Ginny, who's just average."

"Well I'll play Chaser if it comes to it, but I think you should give some of them some more practice time before you decide that. My first team picks would be Natalie, Ginny, and you. I know Natalie is the reserve Seeker, but she's just so much better than the others I think you have to pick her. Ginny wasn't great, in fact I'd say she's not nearly as good as I'd figured she would be. I'd still choose her though, her passing will get better."

"OK, but if we're in a game and getting stomped, I want the option to switch you and Ginny. I watched you last week in the game; you have a lot of talent.....not surprising given that your dad was a professional Chaser."

"You know something screwed up? I didn't know that until this summer, that he played professional Quidditch, for Puddlemere United."

"I used to worship Dumbledore, but having seen him through your eyes like I have.....I just can't do it anymore. I'll be glad to graduate and get out of here with my life and sanity intact. I digress though.....I agree with Ginny, Natalie, and myself, though I want to ask Natalie first if she'll agree to the change. Now the hard part: Keeper. I thought they were pretty even, Ron would be the steadiest, while Geoffrey would be the most spectacular."

"I thought the same thing, and while I know I'm incredibly biased, I think Ron should get the first team slot. He's the incumbent, and you should have to defeat the incumbent noticeably, not just tie him. I guess in a way I don't blame Hooper for what he tried, I might have too in the same circumstance, but he wasn't better than Ron today."

"You told Ron, didn't you?"

"Yes I did Katie, I'm sorry. I just couldn't have him come in here overconfident and get slaughtered. He means too much to me for that, I hope you can understand."

"Why do you think I told you about it in the first place? I want Ron on the team, and I'm mad as hell at what Angelina pulled. She loved your Howler by the way; it came in the middle of a team dinner (Angelina played Quidditch for The Pride of Portree). Her teammates had a lot of fun with her getting a Howler from THE Harry Potter. I don't like it when potential players go over the head of the Captain to get on the team. If there was another person trying out I wouldn't even put Hooper on the Reserve Team."

"Then we're agreed on Ron?"

Katie nodded and called for Natalie to come over for a minute.

"Natalie, we seem to have a situation here: you are better than any of the other eleven Chaser candidates....a lot better. I know you want to

be reserve Seeker, but would you take a starting Chaser spot instead?"

"You bet, that would be awesome. Who would be reserve seeker then? Ginny?"

"Well Ginny will be the third Chaser, and if Harry got hurt during the game I would probably send the one of you that's playing Chaser the worse over to Seeker. However if we're way behind and need a lot of goals, I'll send Ginny over to seeker and have Harry play with us, so that I can have our three best Chasers playing together."

"I'll still work with you on your Seeker skills during the season Natalie, so that next year or the year after you can try out for that spot. By the looks of those people I might have to plan on playing Chaser full time next year."

"That would be great Harry, thank you....and you too of course Katie, this is really cool. I wasn't expecting this when I got up this morning."

"Neither were we Natalie, neither were we."

She called over the players and made her announcement:

First team:

Seeker: Harry Potter

Keeper: Ron Weasley

Beater: Seamus Finnegan

Beater: Jack Sloper

Chaser: Katie Bell

Chaser: Natalie McDonald

Chaser: Ginny Weasley

Reserve Team:

Seeker: Ginny Weasley/Natalie McDonald/Dean Thomas

Keeper: Geoffrey Hooper

Beater: Michael Leach

Beater: Andrew Kirke

Chaser: Dean Thomas

Chaser: Sarah Owen

Chaser: Jill Shaw

Chaser: Ray Figgar

Sarah Owen and Jill Shaw were second and third year girls, respectively; Ray Figgar was a second year boy; they were the best of a bad lot, but were the ones Katie felt had the most potential for the future. Barring injury, only one of them would actually have to play in the next two years (replacing Katie next year). Dean was listed as a Reserve Seeker so that someone could mark Harry during most of the practices, while Ginny and Natalie were playing Chaser on the first team. Dean was told that he was fourth in line as a Chaser, but that he would get practice time there. Katie and Harry both privately thought that this team couldn't hold a candle to the Wood teams, but this was the best they could do under the circumstances. Harry hurried back to the castle, it was now 4:00 pm, and the Shepherd/Bliss meeting was just ninety minutes away.

5:30 pm

The Three Broomsticks

The four of them stared at each other across the table: Peter Tyson, Bill Weasley, Charles Shepherd, and Melissa Bliss. Bill and Peter had arrived first and waited about ten minutes for Melissa and Charles, they wanted to make sure they got a table with a spot near it that

Harry could hide in. The tension in the air was pretty thick, as they all knew what was about to be discussed. Bill figured he should relax things a bit.

"So are you two finally a couple? I mean it's been what? 12 years that you two have been close? I'm waiting for the wedding bells you know."

The two of them looked at each other for a moment and proceeded to laugh uproariously. They had been getting this question, or ones like it, ever since they had become friends in school. Charles smirked at her and opened his mouth to answer, but not before she slapped her hand over his mouth.

"Don't you start that Bill Weasley, I got enough of that for the last two years from Madam Maxime. Every time Charles came to visit I had to hear about it for weeks afterward. That doesn't even bring up our parents, they still haven't figured it out. We're just close friends, nothing more, nothing less."

"Exactly guys, I don't want to hear it either. We tried dating once.....well twice actually, but neither time really worked. We're far better off the way we are. Nor are you one to throw stones Bill, you're not married either."

"Touché. Now let's get down to business. What are we doing here? Does Dumbledore know you're here?"

"No he doesn't know, and he wouldn't approve of it if he did. What has Harry told you about the events of the last week?"

Bill and Peter looked at each other, how much of their access to Harry and friends on a day to day basis should they reveal? They had clued Peter in on the trunk floo, and he and Bill were discussing Bill getting one of the trunks, so that he wouldn't have to rely on the twins' trunk (which was currently in his pocket). Peter answered him.

"Consider us well briefed, Harry has told us the high points, including what went in in your House Charles. The kids are speculating about what your motives are for wanting this meeting."

"At the very least let's consider it an olive branch. Charles and I have had our first up close examination of our friend Dumbledore, and we don't like what we've seen. His performance as Headmaster is one thing, shoddy though it is, it's what he's doing as a war leader that has us concerned. He's not really doing anything to go after Voldemort, he's just worried about what Harry's going to do. Now we weren't there for any of the fireworks this summer, but between Tonks and Remus I have a pretty good idea of what happened between Harry and Dumbledore. We personally don't see the harm in him having some more freedom, but Dumbledore isn't letting it go. In part, we want to warn you about that, and that we want to cooperate with what you're doing."

"We heard about what you did for Blaise, that was pretty interesting."

"I had to, otherwise Blaise wouldn't have lasted the month in that room. I don't think they would have killed him that night, but he would have been beaten up pretty badly. He's reasonably protected now, for the time being anyway.....but it's not going to last that long. Dumbledore and McGonagall didn't react too well to what I did, they objected in particular to forcing eleven year old children to pick a side like that.....but what's done is done. I told them that since they had been so used to let Snape do whatever he pleased with his House, I didn't see the difference in what I was doing. Logic of course is lost on people like that, but they can't afford to get rid of me anyway. I have a question for you two: Did Harry find those Listening Charms?"

"What Listening Charms Charles?"

"The ones in his dorm room, Common Room, and the Room of Requirement.....those Listening Charms."

Bill smiled, this was a good sign. If he really was controlling these two, Dumbledore might have told them to mention the Room of Requirement, since Bill had no doubt that Flitwick had noticed his Muting Charms.....but they wouldn't have admitted to the others, since Harry had sworn up and down that nobody had spilled the beans about them (only Harry's inner circle, plus Dean and Seamus, knew about the charms on Harry's room).

"Yes he did find them, though not quickly enough for comfort. He also knows that there aren't any others, not a good idea on the part of our beloved Headmaster. Not putting up other charms, even as a diversion, let Harry know that he's the sole target of them."

"Dumbledore is fighting a battle within himself about how seriously to take all of this. On the one hand, he still sees Harry as a sixteen year old kid who is still unsure of himself when it comes to most magic, and totally naïve when it comes to our world and making decisions.....on the other hand, what's happened the last couple of months is finally starting to penetrate, and he's worried about Harry going off half-cocked again. The problem that Charles and I have with this, is that he's letting this inner battle play itself out loud in front of the teachers."

"Is he having Harry followed inside the castle? I know it would be hard, but I figure that Tonks could manage it."

"Not that we know of, he hasn't mentioned anything to the teachers who're in the Order. I wouldn't put it past him to try it, but I'm not sure how we could find out unless he told us."

Bill thought that he would have Harry check the Marauders map at random times, they hadn't discussed the possibility of Tonks being in the castle at all. Bill was very disappointed in her, as he had approached her a couple of weeks ago to join them, but again was refused. She gave him the same reasons as she had Harry, though Harry threatening her hadn't done them much good either. They all genuinely liked her, but her loyalty to Dumbledore, while admirable in a sense, was very frustrating. Peter had a question, he had been mostly silent during this discussion.

"Why come to us? You have much better access to Harry than we do, why not just talk to him directly?"

"We felt that a third party approach was best. We know that we need to prove ourselves not to be Dumbledore's agents first, and we hope that we've done so. I also know that you slipped us Veritaserum Bill, so you know that we're on the level."

“Sorry guys, but I had to do that. Harry wants to believe that you’re for real in this, Blaise has certainly been singing your praises all week. The Veritaserum was just a way to reassure us as to your intentions. That said, what do you have in mind here?”

“We want to give Harry an inside look as to what’s going on in the Order and the Hogwarts Staff. Surely you’ve noticed how the old man is cutting your family and Remus Lupin out of the inner workings of the Order, he is under the impression that you tell Harry everything that goes on. We’re not doing this to curry favor with Harry, we genuinely feel the Dumbledore needs some sort of check on him, and you folks are the best option we have to do it.”

“Do any of the other teachers feel as you do?”

“I don’t know Peter, at least not about the prosecution of the war. I know that Jeffrey Hill doesn’t much care for Dumbledore, but that’s due to his subject being marginalized in importance more than anything. I’m sure if you asked him who he supports in the war, he would of course say Dumbledore. Voldemort coming to power would cause him to lose his job, since his subject would no longer be taught. As for the others.....well it’s only been two weeks, and I for one don’t really know any of the them that well. They still kind of seem like our teachers, since they all, outside of Hagrid, taught us.”

“I agree with Melissa on that one, it’s just too soon to tell about them. The non-Order members of the faculty don’t really know much about what’s going on with the war and with Harry. The ones who are in the Order: McGonagall, Hagrid, and Flitwick, are total Dumbledore loyalists, and will do what he wants in regards to Harry. The only objection I heard from any of them is when McGonagall chastised Dumbledore for the position he put Hermione Granger in.”

“I thought you weren’t a member of the Order Charles?”

“Oh how I wish I wasn’t, but Dumbledore decided that since I was Head of Slytherin, I should be in on the Order stuff.....since I would provide a better window into our darker students. I agreed as long as I didn’t have to go on any of their stupid missions.”

"Speaking of Hermione, are they still questioning her? Is she spying on Harry for them?"

"According to McGonagall, she never was technically spying. Dumbledore would just find her periodically and ask her questions about Harry's activities, which she would answer in great detail mind you. I think she liked being thought of as an advisor to the Headmaster, and he played on how important that made her feel. I doubt they're still doing that, since they are fully aware that Harry and Ron have dropped her. She is no longer of any use to Dumbledore, so I would be mildly surprised if he has met with her."

"So he was just using her all along? That's pretty sick Melissa, even for him."

"I have no doubt that if you confronted him about it he would just go into a spiel about how it was to protect Harry. When McGonagall threw it in his face that her House has abandoned her, he didn't bat an eye and ignored it."

"I'll be sure to tell Harry all of that, maybe he can use it to thaw things out between the three of them."

Bill said this, but didn't really believe it. He was amazed that Harry could keep so still during that part of the talk, he wasn't sure who the kid was going to want to hex first: Hermione or Dumbledore. Bill's sympathy for Hermione increased quite a bit, hearing how she had been used by someone even smarter.....and far craftier, than herself. If this was an adult you could rationalize it better, but to take advantage of a child like that left Bill cold. His first instinct was to just quit the Order right then and there, but he knew he wouldn't. Someday pretty soon Harry was going to mount his takeover of the Order of the Phoenix, and Bill meant to be there when Dumbledore went splat. Harry hadn't told him of this plan, and he wasn't totally sure one such plan existed.....but Bill felt it was inevitable the way things were going. He decided that enough plotting had gone on tonight, he wanted to speak with Harry before he questioned or revealed any more.

"You two have given us a lot to think about, and we want to let some of it simmer a night before we talk more about it. Plus, I want to have time to owl Harry (if only they knew, he thought) about what has happened here and get his reaction. Melissa, I know Harry has invited you to the first Defense Association meeting tomorrow, he might talk to you then. Charles, just please keeping looking out for Blaise if you can."

They nodded, and went back to talking about less weighty matters for the rest of their dinner. Harry stole outside about halfway through the meal, he was getting a crick in his back from the physical position he was in. He went on a walk around the town for a little while, returning about ten minutes before the foursome exited the Three Broomsticks. The two teachers said their goodnights, and began their walk back toward the castle.....they could be heard arguing about whether they should have flooed back (Charles' suggestion) or the therapeutic effect of a nice walk after a big dinner (from Melissa). Harry idly watched them to see if they indeed weren't romantic as they claimed, but the only contact that he saw was Melissa smacking Charles on the back of his head. He tugged on Bill's robes to let him know he was there, and the three of them walked off toward the Shrieking Shack to have some privacy.

"What did you think Harry? Do you trust them?"

"More or less, for the moment anyway. The Veritaserum was a nice touch Bill, I'm guessing that Professor Shepherd could tell the taste of it?"

"Veritaserum doesn't have any taste, but he is an expert, so he likely noticed the difference in the consistency of his butterbeer. He still answered, as did Bliss, every question we asked them truthfully. There's no way around the potion, no matter what some snake oil seller in Knockturn Alley might tell you. I for one believed them, they came off as pretty sincere."

"I'm with Bill on that one, they had no good reason to ask for that meeting, other than conviction that it was the right thing to do. Dumbledore isn't dumb enough to send them in there like that, he'd know that we would test them like we did. The only thing I'm worried

about, for them, is what the old guy will do when he finds that they've switched sides.....so to speak. I know that Charles doesn't need this job, and I would imagine Melissa wouldn't have a hard time finding a job afterward.....but I keep wondering at what point is Dumbledore going to snap, when he just loses that one extra time to you and it causes him to do something rash. It's obvious to anyone that he's in decline, he just hasn't noticed it yet."

"I won't talk to Bliss tomorrow after the meeting, at least not very much. Let's not give away that we can communicate so easily, let them think that we need a few days to let our owls go back and forth. I'll acknowledge that I know the meeting took place and seemed to go well."

"Does Shepherd make you regret not taking Potions this year? He's a good guy Harry, Charlie speaks pretty well of him, they had a lot of classes together in school."

"Nothing could possibly make me regret not taking Potions Bill, but I agree he's a nice guy. Ron speaks well of him too, he must have a way with Weasleys. Now I'd better get back to my room, I've been gone a long time."

"Doesn't Ron have one of those mirrors to contact you?"

"Yes he does, and I didn't hear anything coming out of it while I was in The Three Broomsticks. I talked to him for a few minutes while you guys were having your dinner, all was quiet, though my absence at dinner was noticed by a few people. Ron just told them I was tired ."

"I have to ask Harry, what did you think about what they said about Hermione?"

"Let me just say it's a good thing that I don't have ready access to that bastard right now, or the Final Battle would be me versus him, not me versus Voldemort. Unfortunately, it doesn't change my overall view of Hermione, at least not greatly. She knew what was going on Bill, and she has not showed any remorse.....I'll tell you what, bring a Pensieve next week to the executive council meeting and I'll show you how the 'talk' went with her."

"Good enough Harry, now let's get you out of here." With that, Bill took the trunk out of his pocket and enlarged it. Harry hopped in and flooed back to his own trunk, where Dobby had his dinner waiting. He mirrored Ron and Neville to come down for an update, and they spent the next hour rehashing what had happened. Harry seized on his idea about showing Bill the 'talk', and mentally decided to buy his own Pensieve. He had heard before that only adult wizards were allowed to buy them, but now that he was officially an adult he could do it.....except that under no circumstances did he want Dumbledore to know that he had one, the old man would stop at nothing to see what was in it. Harry believed Tony Hook's (from Trunkenstein) assurances about the security system, but he didn't want to give Dumbledore an incentive to try to get around it.

Ron took much the same view of Hermione that Harry did, he maintained that he could forgive her if only she would admit that she was wrong. Harry privately felt that Ron might be egging Ginny on in her quest for Hermione retribution, given his previous 'feelings' for Hermione and what the split must have meant to him. Neville kept quiet during all of the Hermione talk, he realized that he was her replacement and didn't want to seem like he was trying to keep his spot by badmouthing her. He did feel sorry for Hermione, and sympathized with her being an outcast, since that could easily describe him over the years. He agreed with Ron though that she had brought most of it on herself, with her actions.

Sunday September 15, 1996

1:45 pm

Hogwarts Great Hall

The Great Hall looked a bit strange with all of the tables moved to the side. Harry, Ron, and Neville had moved them in preparation for the first Defense Association meeting.....well the first meeting that the entire school knew about. Notices had gone up in all of the Common Rooms, and Professors Bliss and Flitwick made sure that everyone knew about the meeting during their classes. They had no idea how many people would show up, and Harry and Justin had a bet going

with Blaise and Anthony on whether or not Malfoy would show up, and Harry had a separate one going with Luna on whether Hermione would (Harry figured Draco would, but Hermione wouldn't). He knew that he would give Malfoy the boot as soon as he tried to show his face, but figured to give Hermione a tiny chance to redeem herself if she did.

Students began trickling in, the Gryffindors all waved hello to Harry as they walked in. He assumed that most, if not all, the eligible ones would show up from his House. Perversely, he also had a good idea about how many Slytherins would show up, given Shepherd's machinations on his and Blaise's behalf. The real questions would be Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. He knew that he was pretty popular with the older Ravenclaws now, but would the younger years bite? About the Hufflepuffs he had no clue, the House was bereft of leadership and even Justin (the Hufflepuff Harry was closest to) had no real gauge of how the recruiting was going in there.

More students were coming in, and the first Slytherins entered the Hall, following closely behind Blaise and his sixth year allies. There were a total of 18 students total from Slytherin, every one of Blaise's supporters from years three through six (the other ten were in the first two years, who were not eligible for the DA). Harry walked up to Blaise and his group.

"Thank you all for coming, I want you all to know that I appreciate the stand you took last weekend and are still taking. I know that Slytherin gets a bad rap, but you have proven that stereotypes can be quite dangerous. Welcome to the DA." The Slytherins were all smiling at him, which he thought was just as unlikely a sight as Blaise being in his Common Room the previous day.....18 Slytherins smiling at him, without malice.....if only Sirius could see this now.

Harry lost both his bets as it turned out, Malfoy never made an appearance, nor did anyone that had openly sided with him. Hermione slipped in at the last minute, a few beats before Bliss and Flitwick came in. Harry saw her enter, and nodded in her direction, but otherwise didn't acknowledge her. All in total, 126 students were in attendance, including all twenty-nine members of the executive council.

Slytherin: 18 students

Hufflepuff: 21 students

Ravenclaw: 40 students

Gryffindor: 47 students

Every Gryffindor who was old enough to come, did. Most of the Ravenclaws were there as well, including Marietta Edgecombe; she had declined a place in the executive council, saying that it would make her feel too awkward. The disappointment was Hufflepuff, that was a low turnout, particularly from the largest House in the school. Harry reminded himself to ask Justin about that later.

"Welcome everyone to the 1996 version of the Defense Association. Many of you may have heard of last year's version, which we were forced to start because of shoddy teaching. I can safely say that we don't have that worry this year (he motioned toward Professor Bliss), but we need all the practice we can get. Professor Flitwick is going to be our faculty advisor (tiny Flitwick waved at everyone), and Professor Bliss has offered to help us as well. The early part of this club is going to be about basic attack and defense spells, then we'll move on to more advanced spells and defense tactics, including some muggle martial arts. Now of course the Professors and I can't individually work with you as much as we would like, so we're going to be sectioning you off with designated mentors, who will not be a member of your House if we can help it. I'm all for House unity, and I'm quite proud that all the third through sixth year Gryffindors came here today, but I want to stress that we're all in this together. Our meetings will be every other Sunday for the time being, at 2:00 pm just like now, with meetings lasting around ninety minutes. Right now I want you all to stand over against that table."

The collected students, minus the executive council moved against the left wall. Harry walked up to them and began counting off one through ten (there were 97 students aside from the executive council). He then took the 10 groups and arbitrarily split them in half, so that what remained were twenty groups of five people each. Each

member of the executive council was directed to one of the groups, with eight of the groups getting two of them (the ones that Harry made sure got two mentors were ones that Colin, Dennis, Parvati, Lavender, Dean, and Seamus went to). Harry himself would just wander around when they were in their small groups.

“These will be your groups for the time being, though we will certainly move people around if legitimate personality conflicts arise. We won’t be using them much today, but I want you to get comfortable with your partners. Your mentors are members of last year’s DA, and will be helping you with the spells and tactics that we’ll be studying. Listen to them, and obey them.....or you’re out of here. That might sound harsh, but with such a large club we need discipline to get anything done. I have the authority to boot anyone out of here that I want, for any reason.....and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to never need to use that right.”

The meeting at that point had another hour to go, so Harry and Flitwick talked with the students about what spells they were going to cover. At Harry’s invitation, Bliss reminisced about her days as an Auror, and told some stories about captures and arrests she had made. For the last half hour, they worked in their groups on the basic shield spell (Protego). As Harry walked by Hermione’s group (her mentors were Lisa Turpin and Dean Thomas), he noted that she wasn’t saying much to her partners.....almost as if she was making an effort not to try to take it over. He smiled as he thought of this, maybe there was some potential for a little forgiveness there. At least he would have to kick her out anytime soon, hopefully.

Things ended, and Harry bid everyone a good evening. He had the Governor’s Banquet that night to go to, which he hoped would be fireworks free, but not too boring. He approached Professor Bliss as she was leaving the Hall.

“Bill owled me about last night, I want you to know that I’m glad that you and Professor Shepherd are on our side.”

“So you’re accepting our offer of help then Harry?”

"Yes I am, with the condition that you not expose yourselves too much, or risk a lot on my behalf. The Veritaserum touch, which I assure you I didn't know about, was the kicker. I'd better get going, will I be seeing tonight at the Banquet?"

"You will, all the Professors will be there. See you there."

She walked back to her rooms, while Harry went up to Gryffindor Tower.

The banquet was pretty uneventful for the most part. The attendees were the Hogwart's Board of Governors (and spouses), the staff, and thirteen students (the top ten students, plus Governors Award winners Neville, Justin and Parvati). It was a relatively formal affair that involved dress robes and more than a couple of speeches. Lisa was made much of, as the top student of the year, and with three Governors Awards to boot; Harry applauded her as much as anyone. Harry got the most applause when accepting his Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts plaques, copies of which would reside in the Hogwarts Trophy Room (as they would for all the other recipients as well). After the meal, Blaise introduced Harry to his parents, who were quite friendly. Harry had seen Mr. Zabini at the Board meeting he had attended, but they didn't actually speak then, and he found Mr. Zabini to be an interesting guy. Likewise, so was Philip Greengrass, Daphne's uncle. She wasn't at the dinner, but had mentioned her new friendship with Harry in a letter. Both he and Manuel were appreciative at the efforts Harry was making with Slytherin, and how down to earth their son/niece had described him as. They had a nice chat before saying their goodnights, and as Harry made to leave the banquet room, he found Amelia Bones in his path.

"Harry, I was asked to give you this message, and against my better judgment I'm complying. Please be careful." She walked out of the room and left a confused Harry standing there with a folded piece of parchment in his hand. He opened it up and read:

Dear Harry,

I was hoping we might have a chance to talk soon, things are changing and I feel we need to clear the air between us. Please meet

me in the Three Broomsticks this Saturday at Noon. Bring Peter Tyson if you wish, but only him.....I would prefer that we not have too large an audience at first. If Dumbledore gives you a hard time about leaving the castle, send your owl to me at the inn, and I'll come get you.

Yours,

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

Author's Note: I should have explained this at the beginning of the last chapter, but I forgot about it: A reviewer commented on Voldemort watching the Draco assault on the train platform, but Harry didn't feel him there. It is my understanding that Harry only feels pain the scar when Voldemort is either really happy or really angry; on the platform Voldemort was only amused. I'm figuring it takes extreme emotions to trigger it, because Harry would never have lasted an entire year in Defense class with Voldemort on the back of Quirrel's head otherwise, he'd have gone insane first.

Harry walked back to the Common Room in a slight daze, staring at the note as he did. He knew this should not be a surprise, but it was all the same. Harry sometimes forgot about Fudge entirely, so consumed he was by his battles with Voldemort and Dumbledore lately. He had to wonder about what Percy must thinking right now, he knew from Arthur that Percy was still Fudge's gofer.....was he behind this, as a way to approach his family again? He got back to the Common Room and went up to his trunk without a word, ignoring the many hellos that came his way. He had such a distracted look that no one took offense at his behavior. Ron had said he would be in the library all night studying with Susan, and Neville wasn't to be seen either, so Harry changed his clothes and flooed over to Luna's trunk. She was hip deep in her Potions homework, but looked up with a bright smile when Harry appeared in her living room.....a smile that faded as she caught sight of his face. He handed her the note without a word; reading it, she realized what had him looking like this.

"What do you think Luna? Is this a peace offering?"

"It would seem to be Harry, at least on the surface. The question is, do you want peace with Fudge? I know we've speculated on it a lot in the past couple of months, but now is the time to decide for real."

"I don't hate Fudge like I used to Luna, if anything I pity him. I don't know if peace with him is something that I absolutely crave, but I'm worn out from Dumbledore alone.....and that's with Voldemort leaving me alone lately. That still puzzles me too, and I'm not sure if I want to ask Dumbledore why, the less contact he and I have the better. The thing is, I just don't know on how many fronts I can fight a war. I just don't think I can fight the three of them at once, even with

all the support I get from my friends.....and my special friend." Luna hugged him tightly at that; she could feel how tired he was. Harry didn't know that Peter had told Luna of Harry's comments to him the day they met (the pieces of glass speech), he wanted Luna to keep a watch over Harry, and be there for moments like this.

Luna had found a lot of joy in her relationship with Harry, which was now almost two months old. Due to the trunk system they were able to spend a lot of time together, much more than they would have otherwise, being in different years and Houses. Harry never seemed more relaxed than when he was alone with her, she thought. Harry was her first boyfriend, and she felt as though she was his first true girlfriend. Cho, in a jealous mood that was pretty typical of her that year, had informed much of Ravenclaw what had gone on during their date in Hogsmeade.....though in many ways it had backfired on her, as many of the boys in the House sympathized with Harry's difficulty in dealing with Cho's wide ranging emotional state that year; while quite a few of the girls didn't like her anyway because of her looks. Harry's popularity in Ravenclaw, though he didn't realize this at the time, had gone way up. Luna had watched all of this with her usual detachment, but worried about Harry throughout the remainder of the year. She had readily volunteered to go the Department of Mysteries in part because she was afraid of what he would do if left totally to his own devices. As it was, little good had come out of it so far and a lot bad. Harry had told her, and only her among his peers (Peter knew, but no other adult), about his casting of Cruciatus on Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry had told her that if he had it to do over again he wouldn't have tried that spell; he just would have attempted to punch her or something. Luna was dreading the next encounter with Bellatrix, it would be a contest between Harry and Neville over who would get to harm her first.

The one good thing, for five of them anyway, is that their confidence in their fighting abilities rose tremendously. Luna herself hadn't had a clue she could do that well against that type of competition, and it was a revelation to her. She'd always known that she was a pretty powerful witch, but this was beyond that. Some rough details of what had happened there were circulating around her House as well, likely told by Harry to Anthony or Lisa on purpose to help her. No one other than her parents had ever really looked out for Luna before, certainly

no one at Hogwarts, and it warmed her to think of all the trouble Harry was going to do so. Her roommates were being a little nicer to her, and because of the trunk they couldn't screw around with her things. What was even better was how much the sixth years had taken her under their wing. More than one of them (besides Lisa and Terry on the train ride) had confessed their embarrassment over what had been happening; she suspected that her roommates were getting a lot of veiled threats.

This thing with Fudge had her worried though; she had heard many horrible things about him from her father over the years. Now it seemed that Fudge wanted to bury the hatchet with Harry, and her boyfriend wanted to do it as well, if only to get one less thing off his mind. Luna loved Harry, but realized the kind of high strung, Richard II kind of person he was.

"What did Ronald and Neville say about this?"

"They haven't seen it, Neville left the banquet before I got it. I was talking to the Zabinis and the Greengrasses for awhile afterward. I came straight here once I got the Gryffindor Tower, I wanted you to see it before they did."

"You're going to make a deal with him, aren't you?"

"I don't know Luna, but I'm going to go in there prepared to do so, if I like what he has to say."

"You want Sirius' name cleared, that's what you'll ask for." She didn't ask this as a question, she stated it as a fact.

"Among other things, but that's the most important to me. The thing is, he's going to want my support in the next election, and I don't know if I can go that far. Blaise's father is probably going to run, and I liked him when I talked with him last night. I need to talk to Blaise about it sometime this week before I decide about that."

"What else will you want from him?"

"I'm not sure; I have a week to think about it. I'm guessing that you don't want me to make any arrangements with him?"

"I don't want you to ally with him because he's the least of three evils Harry, I know you loathe Dumbledore right now, and Merlin knows I agree with you.....but is he truly worse than Fudge?"

"That's the thousand galleon question, isn't it? I just can't see myself trusting the old man ever again, which hurts, because I looked up to him so much. To know that I was just a tool to him, after all these years.....that's what separates him from Fudge. With Fudge I know what I'm getting, I understand that he's out for himself and I can adjust accordingly. Dumbledore claims to have a higher moral purpose, but in the end he's just a politician himself. You saw the way he bargained with me at our meetings, it only makes me wonder how much further I could have gone."

"And now you want to bargain with Fudge.....I guess I don't blame you. Are you going to tell Dumbledore about the meeting?"

"In a manner of speaking. I'm going to ask McGonagall for permission to go to Hogsmeade, just in case someone spots us there. I have no doubt that she'll bump the decision up to Dumbledore, and he'll call me in for another little chat."

"He's not stupid, he'll know what that meeting will be about. He'll have someone eavesdrop on you during it."

"I'd be shocked if he didn't try. I think I'll let Fudge handle that part of it, I'm sure he....or whomever is advising him lately, will have thought of it and will have a solution handy. I'm going to owl Peter and ask him to be busy that day, I've put the guy through enough hassles with Dumbledore, and I don't need him being on Fudge's bad side if the meeting were to grow ugly. I'll get Bill to come with me, I'm sure he'll enjoy getting a look at Percy again.

"I'm tired of talking about Dumbledore and Fudge, let's change the subject to something more fun: I owe you a Sickle from our bet today, double or nothing says that Ron and Susan are either snogging right now, or will be before the evening is over."

Harry the Happy was back now, Luna grinned at him with no small sense of relief.

"Done.....and speaking of snogging, my Potions homework doesn't have to be done right this minute."

Wednesday September 18, 1996

The bet would go undecided however, as Ron refused to give many details about his study date with Susan. The two of them had taken to meeting in the library most evenings to study, taking a table right in the center of the room, where there would be no temptations. Susan's OWL scores hadn't been terrific either (she ranked 22nd out of 39 in the class), so she was just as motivated as Ron to get her grades up. For the first time in his Hogwarts life Ron was enjoying studying, and it was having positive results in the classroom as well, more and more of what was taught this year wasn't passing him by in a fog. Potions in particular was going very well, as Shepherd was a much better teacher than Snape (who was more of a lecturer than an actual teacher).

The one detail Ron had been willing to give his friends, and his ever prying sister, was that he and Susan were now officially a couple. They held hands when they walked the halls together, and yes they had briefly snogged a couple of times, though he was loathe to tell his friends about it. It wasn't that he was ashamed or anything, but Ron believed in a code when it came to dealing with girls.....and the first rule was that a gentleman never tells. They had a nice thing going, and Ron wasn't about to much it up by bragging about what they did, even though he knew Harry and Neville were discreet.

Ron was aware of the subtle shifts that had happened since the summer began, and that while he was nominally still Harry's best friend, others had joined him on that level to an extent. Luna was one person who had, Ron too had noticed how much more relaxed Harry was whenever he was with her. Fred and George too were now on his plane, Harry had enjoyed living with them so much that he had told everyone he saw no reason to change things by moving. It pleased him that Harry was making a lot of new friends in other

Houses, he too was overcoming his ‘Gryffindor or nobody’ attitude; Susan was just one example of that. They had talked during the last executive council meeting about doing some social things between the Houses, and he was quite in favor of it.

Ron thought Fudge was on the level with his meeting request, and he felt that Percy had to be behind it. Of all the higher ups in the Ministry, no one (including Arthur) knew Harry better than Percy, and how to deal with him. He knew that his wayward brother was probably the second smartest of the Weasley children (after Bill), and since he still had his job with Fudge, he must be an asset of some sort beyond blind allegiance.

Transfiguration was going on now, they were learning about animagus transformations. McGonagall was adamant that no one would be trying to do it this year, but next year she would be working with those who wanted to learn to do it. The list would likely be a short one, only one person in last year’s seventh year class had even tried.....and that person, a Hufflepuff, hadn’t succeeded. Ron had no desire to become an animagus himself, though he had looked through Harry’s books with interest. He had talked with Sirius last year while cleaning out doxies and learned what the Marauders had done to learn how to transform, and many of the details left him sick to his stomach.

Class was now letting out, and Harry hung back to talk with McGonagall. Ron and Neville stood by the doorway, waiting and wondering.

“Professor McGonagall, may I have a word please?”

“Certainly, what’s on your mind?”

“I received a note from Minister Fudge the other day, asking me to meet him in Hogsmeade on Saturday for lunch and a chat. May I have permission to go?”

He had the note in his pocket, ready to produce if McGonagall didn’t believe him. He didn’t expect her to give a decision right away, and she didn’t disappoint.

"Let me ask the Headmaster about that, he will need to give his permission as well for a trip out of school when the other students aren't going as well. For what it's worth, I'll give my endorsement.....we can't be denying the Minister his dining companion now can we? I take it that you want to meet him?"

"It can't hurt to hear what he has to say. He's extending an olive branch perhaps, I don't want to throw it back in his face without giving him a chance."

"True, very true Harry. I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore about it, you can expect to hear from one of us about it."

"Thank you ma'am, see you later."

Harry and friends ran off to Herbology and Potions, respectively, as McGonagall sat her desk looking pensive. Dumbledore wasn't going to like this one bit she thought.

Friday September 19, 1996

Headmaster's Office

1:30 pm

It turned out that Dumbledore in fact didn't like it one bit, and had gone to great lengths to try and prevent the meeting. He and Fudge had met on Thursday for their weekly lunch, part of their new spirit of cooperation....with a Daily Prophet photographer hovering nearby of course. This was part of the price Dumbledore was having to pay to ensure no more 'Educational Decrees'. Ironically, Draco had pegged Dumbledore's view of the Minister quite well: He was wary of trying to get rid of him, for fear that someone less pliable would take office. There had been times though, the previous year especially, when he bitterly regretted never taking the job.....life would be much more hassle free if he had.

During their lunch, he had lightly probed at first, trying to divine what Fudge wanted to talk with Harry about. The Minister changed the

subject every time though, and much more smoothly than in the past. It wasn't like Fudge to be so deft, which worried the old man. In the end Dumbledore had to flat out ask the reason for wanting to meet Harry, and all Fudge said was 'oh to clear the air Dumbledore, can't have the lad hating me forever now can I?' That was the phrase used in the note, which Dumbledore of course hadn't yet seen. He went into a longish spiel about righting past wrongs, and bridging gaps and whatnot. It was an impressive display of cliché for the Minister, who talked for five minutes straight on the subject of Harry....without really saying anything substantive, but conveying a positive tone. The old man did his best to dissuade him from meeting the lad, but it was to no avail. He had even intimated, somewhat desperately, that Harry might not want to meet the Minister. That backfired as Fudge produced a short note from Harry accepting his invitation, provided he could get permission to leave the castle. Such permission Dumbledore reluctantly granted, and he told the Minister as much, but he resolved to speak with Harry before telling the young man so.

Harry didn't know any of this, indeed he had only vaguely heard of the weekly lunches, given that he didn't read the Daily Prophet. His week had gone by swimmingly, sixth year really was a somewhat relaxed year in terms of classes and homework. Oh the teachers gave it, but they were easing everyone along, slowly building them up. Having only six classes helped immeasurably, as there was more time to concentrate on each one. Every time he saw Luna trying to juggle ten classes it made his skin crawl, how he had managed even nine he wondered? He studied with her most every night, sometimes when he finished his homework early he took out one of his Knockturn books and studied the curses in them. There were a few really dangerous ones that he thought he had a handle on the theory of, part of him was itching for a Death Eater to come attack him so he could try them out. He knew this meeting was going to be fun, he couldn't imagine that the old fellow would just say 'no, I don't care what the Minister wants, you're not leaving Hogwarts'. He remembered his demand that he be treated like a normal student, no different from Dean or Colin.....he suspected that said demand was about to be thrown in his face. He politely accepted a lemon drop this time, and waited for the battle to begin.

"Hello Harry, how has your term been so far?"

“Fine sir, thank you. And yours?”

“Very calm so far, which is a nice change of pace, for us both I would think.”

“So far so good I’d say Professor.”

“Yes, though that bothers me a touch. You’ve had no scar warnings? No strange visions?”

“No sir I haven’t, I practice my Occlumency every evening, and nothing untoward has happened. I tend to think that Voldemort wants the connection shut off as well, but that’s just a shot in the dark.”

“Well Harry, we might as well get right to it. Professor McGonagall told me of Minister Fudge’s lunch invitation to you, and that you want to go to Hogsmeade tomorrow. I’m not sure if that’s such a good idea.”

There’s a shocker, it was all Harry could do not to start snickering. He kept his face composed though, retaining a pleasant stony expression.

“Why not sir? I’m sure if the Minister meant me any harm, he wouldn’t seek to talk with me first.”

“Well for one thing it would set a bad example for the students, allowing you to visit Hogsmeade as you please.”

“It is not as I please though, the Minister of Magic has requested my presence, I could hardly refuse could I? I can promise you that I didn’t solicit this meeting, but I admit that I’m curious to hear what he has to say.” With that, Harry pulled Fudge’s note from his pocket and slid it across the desk. Dumbledore took special note of the last line.

“However if you don’t feel I should be allowed to go, that’s fine. I agree it wouldn’t be a good thing for other students to find out that I’ve left the grounds on a special trip. You’ll have to explain that to the Minister though, good luck.”

With that, Harry stood up and made to leave the office. He knew that the old man would try and stop him, Dumbledore wasn't about to let it end this way.

"Wait a minute Harry, I haven't said no. In fact I told the Minister yesterday that you could go, provided you didn't stay away too long. I would prefer the meeting to be held here, in the safety of the castle."

"You would prefer that we not meet at all, you're afraid of what Fudge and I might promise each other, aren't you?"

"Yes I am, I don't mind admitting that. I think you might be overreaching yourself this time Harry, you don't have the blackmail material on the Minister that you think you have on me."

"That I KNOW I have, not to put to fine a point on it. How nice of you to bring it up though, did I try to use it today? Nope, I accepted your decision and was prepared to deal with it. Don't try to adopt an injured persona Professor, you can't quite pull it off.....at least not with me." Harry's tone of voice was so cold that Dumbledore couldn't help himself from asking a question, though as soon as he said it he knew it was a mistake:

"You really hate me, don't you Harry?"

"Not at all sir, you're quite a nice man after all. Now your failures as a Headmaster and self-appointed guardian? Well those are quite the lengthy list aren't they? I doubt I will ever forgive you for the Dursleys, and for Snape.....and for Sirius. I trusted you above all others, because I respected you above all others.....only to find out that I'm nothing more than a tool to you, just the final weapon. My entire childhood has been one lie after another, one hell after another. Do you have some degree of affection for me? I have no doubt, though I'm sure guilt contributes to it. In the end though, I'm a walking Avada Kedavra for Voldemort, the only one that will work it seems. I know that's not your fault, but you could have prepared me much, much better over the years. No, Professor Dumbledore, I don't hate you.....but it will be a long, long time before I trust you again..... I don't dare. Now this is the second meeting we've had in a three week

span, and I'm tired of them already. If I get a vision, I assure you I'll tell Professor McGonagall. Please leave me alone, good day."

"Stop right there Harry, I will not be spoken to like that. I indulged you last June, but I have had enough.

You have forgotten yourself young man, you don't seem to understand that you are a student in a school where I am the Headmaster." Dumbledore put steel in his words, as he had finally lost his patience with Harry.

"A Headmaster who has his job because I held back at the Board of Governors meeting. You didn't bring me in here as Headmaster, you brought me in here as head of the Order of the Phoenix, an organization that I do not belong to and never will. I notice that you didn't deny any of my charges, you only took issue with my tone. Have I raised my voice to you since June? Privately or in public I have kept my temper remarkably in check. Do you think I relish this? Eh? Let me assure that I don't. May I remind you that I never asked for any of this! I would give every galleon I have to trade places with Anthony Goldstein or Justin Finch-Fletchley, but life never asked me what I wanted, did it?" Harry sighed, and his voice took on a conciliatory tone:

"Look Professor, we are on the same side here, we both have the same objective: get rid of Voldemort. Unfortunately that won't happen tomorrow, and I would just prefer to have as normal life as possible in the interim. You want to deny me that, in the interests of 'protecting me'. That is our main difference, in a nutshell. I don't see a way to bridge that difference, given that outside of Hogwarts I will do exactly as I please. While in Hogwarts I of course will abide by your rules, the fact that I asked for permission to leave the grounds in the first place is an example of that. We all make mistakes, heaven knows I have. While I may not trust you, I don't want to fight with you."

"Nor I with you.....what about the muting charms in the Room of Requirement? I know that was your handiwork."

"I take it those were yours?" Seeing a nod, "Now how was I supposed to know who put them there? For all I knew Umbridge could have left

them there, or my good friend Draco. I didn't disturb the ones in my dorm room, did I?"

"No you didn't, no you didn't. I can't say I'm surprised that you know about them. This situation is very frustrating Harry, I don't like us at odds either. I suppose it wouldn't do any good to ask to accompany you tomorrow?" Dumbledore didn't bother to ask what they were doing in the Room of Requirement, he already suspected that Harry and his friends picked there to meet.

"I don't think the Minister would appreciate that sir. Besides, I think you and I need some space from each other. I repeat, whatever may have happened, I don't hate you, just as I know you don't hate me. You and I both know what I want from Fudge: justice for Sirius. I'm in the best position to get it right now, and I'm going to.....I owe him that much. You can rest assured that I won't go too far with Fudge, Bill Weasley will be there to make sure of that."

"Very well Harry, at least you won't be going in there alone. I have the utmost respect for Bill, he will give you good counsel. Just be back here before dinner, no side trips please."

"I'll be back by 2:00 pm sir, I have Quidditch practice then. I'd better get on to my homework now, I have a Charms essay that needs writing. Have a nice day Professor."

"To you as well Harry, be careful tomorrow."

Harry stood up, and without looking back, left the Headmaster's office.

Saturday, September 20, 1996

Outside the Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade

11:55 am

Harry and Bill walked up to the door of the Three Broomsticks, and paused for a moment looking around. Bill was trying to spot where the Aurors would likely be hidden, he figured there must be some around for Fudge's protection. Harry was also trying to spot an Auror,

or an ex-Auror in any case, namely Tonks. He assumed Dumbledore would try to eavesdrop on them, and Tonks was his best method of doing so. Bill had met him at the front gate of school and they had walked over to Hogsmeade, chatting about what their strategy would be. Peter indeed had plans scheduled for the day, with his family, but appreciated Harry's interest in shielding him from any potential Fudge wrath (much as he dearly wanted to see what happened). Bill told Harry that he wouldn't miss this for the world, he was particularly hoping that Percy would be there. Bill knew it would be awkward if so, meeting his estranged brother while accompanying his surrogate brother, but Percy had chosen his path.

They entered the pub, and Madam Rosmerta greeted Bill quite enthusiastically. Harry looked at him with raised eyebrows, but Bill smoothly deflected any potential questions by asking her if Fudge had arrived. She directed him to the pub's private room, where two bodyguards stood outside the room. They walked inside to find Fudge and Percy sitting at a table for four, drinking butterbeer and quietly talking. Fudge sprang to his feet and stretched out his hand to each of them in turn.

"Well hello there Harry, and Bill Weasley too, I haven't seen you in quite some time. How are you both?"

"Fine thank you Minister, thank you for the invitation. Percy, hello."

"That's Mr. Weasley to you Potter." Indeed Percy did not look thrilled to see either Harry or his brother. Fudge gave him a dark look and he stayed seated, without greeting Bill. Harry gave Percy a warm smile, and decided to have a bit of fun.

"Certainly Percy, whatever you say. I'm sorry Minister but Peter Tyson is having a weekend away with his family, I hope you don't mind that I brought Bill?"

"Of course not, you're very welcome here Bill. Please sit down, both of you. I took the liberty of ordering some lunch for you, I'm assuming the Headmaster wants you back as soon as possible." Harry had no intention of missing Quidditch practice for any of this, but didn't mention that.

They spent the next fifteen minutes chatting, though Percy was silent as a tomb. They did all the polite inquiring about families, jobs, and schoolwork. Fudge was clearly trying very hard to be friendly, and Harry had to give him credit for that much at least. When the food arrived things turned a bit more serious.

"Well Harry, I suppose we should talk about a few things. First, I would like to apologize to you for all that happened last year with Dolores Umbridge. I know now how wrong I was, letting her have unfettered control of your school."

"Dumbledore says that she's in St. Mungos, and not looking too good. Is this true?"

"Yes it is, her experience with the Centaurs.....well her mind clearly was breaking already, Albus says that she threatened you with Cruciatus, good heavens. I made a mistake trusting her like that Harry, I hope in time you, and the rest of the students, can forgive me for it."

"Are you also aware that it was she who sent the two Dementors after me in Little Whinging last summer? That my whole trial and what came out of it could have been avoided?"

"Dumbledore told me that as well, I honestly don't know what that woman was thinking. I will freely admit that I wanted you discredited last year, and I tried very hard to do so.....but I did not want you physically harmed at any point Harry. I know I've given you no reason to trust me, but I ask you to believe that."

Harry actually did believe that, as strange as that might sound. He just couldn't see this man going that far, to have his soul sucked out. The apology was going well so far, he had to admit that.

"I accept your apology for Umbridge Minister, it was a very large mistake that I'm sure you won't be making again."

"Too right, too right. I was wrong to go after you in the Daily Prophet, but I.....I just didn't want to believe he was back. It was just too

easy to think it was the story of some mentally imbalanced child. Umbridge was certainly no help there I might tell you. I know now that you were right about him obviously, and you clearly are not imbalanced at all. Judging by your OWL scores, you're quite smart as well. I normally would have been at the Governor's Banquet, but I wanted our first meeting to be under controlled conditions, for both our sakes. Now this business about Voldemort. I wanted to tell you in person that the Death Eaters who you fought with at the Department of Mysteries will be going on trial in a few weeks. The first Monday in November I believe is the time.....what was the date exactly Percy?"

"Monday, November 4 sir."

"Yes, that's it. Lucius Malfoy will go first, then the others in succession. Since he is their leader, once we have convicted him, the others will fall into place. You and your friends will be the star witnesses obviously, and I have no doubt your testimony alone will put them in Azkaban for life."

"I was under the impression that you didn't want to give them trials at all?"

"Honestly I don't, Lucius Malfoy should not be given a chance to talk his way out of this. I thought he was my friend, when it reality he was using me for his own purposes. I'm very bitter about that, and yes.....I want revenge for it. I have been prevailed upon to give he and his gang trials, and I will see that justice is done."

"Certainly I will do what I can to help that sir, I want him put away as badly as you do."

"I know you do Harry, I'm all too aware of your rivalry with his son. On another subject, I've been following your Dumbledore difficulties with great interest. I must say the way you handled Snape was quite ingenious. I had a chat with Travis Biller and he's convinced that you set Snape up, is that true?"

"We didn't so much set him up, as we planned for what might happen when he came to my house. If he had left me alone, I would have done the same with him."

Fudge laughed, and Harry and Bill both smiled. This was going pretty well so far, and almost in spite of himself Harry was starting to like the man. He half wondered if Fudge would bring up Sirius himself and save him the trouble. Percy had said little so far, and clearly was there only because he was ordered. Ron had told Harry his theory that Percy set this whole thing up, a theory that was being bludgeoned by Percy's behavior. Before he could ask a question, Bill pulled out his wand and did a scan of the room for listening charms or other surveillance. Percy looked alarmed at the drawn wand, but his boss just sat there smiling.

"I had my men do a sweep when we entered the room, but I agree Bill that it is best to be cautious."

"What is your opinion of Harry's 'Dumbledore difficulties', as you call them?"

"Albus Dumbledore is a powerful presence, and through his tenure at Hogwarts he has educated practically our entire population. This gives him an enormous influence, one that I have been trying to break away from in recent years, as you both no doubt have noticed. I tend to think that no small part of my miscalculations of the last couple of years have been due to taking the other side of the issue from Dumbledore, just to show that I'm not his tool. In and of itself that is a very foolish reason to do something Harry, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time. In answer to your question, on a purely personal level I am delighting in your breaking away from him, especially given the stratagems that you and your advisors are using. On an official level I am concerned about it, particularly as rumor of it has been circulating throughout our world."

Harry wondered what the man would say if he told him the Prophecy, not that he had any interest in doing so, other than for the shock value. Fudge's confessions were having the desired effect on him, he wasn't quite taking pity on the man.....but he could understand the motivation for what he had done, in a way. The man clearly was on his side in the dispute, though it was more of him being wary of Dumbledore than in favor of Harry. He had a sudden flash of inspiration:

"Thank you for your candor sir, I appreciate it. Now I have another question for you, and I will swear any oath that you want that we will not tell your answer to Dumbledore or his people: Do you have someone inside The Order of the Phoenix?" Percy's eyes went wide, and he looked at his master with apprehension.....who in fact looked pretty impressed.

"Yes I do Harry, but under no circumstances will I tell you who it is. That was a very crafty question I must say."

"Thank you..... I think." They both smiled at that, and a level of accord seemed to be reached right there. "I don't blame you for not telling me who it is, and I would not have asked you to anyway. Under the circumstances I think it's pretty wise to keep tabs on him. Do you see Dumbledore as an enemy, or just someone who's influence you are trying to shrug off?"

"The latter of course, at least until we've defeated Voldemort, I understand now that I need his help to do so. After that.....who knows. What about you? Is he your enemy or just an annoyance?"

"Pretty much what you said, right now he's just an annoyance and someone who wants to keep control of me when I feel otherwise. I agree that we need him to defeat Voldemort though, he is very powerful. After the war? I doubt he'll have much use for me, so it won't be a factor." This was as close as Harry wanted to come to telling Fudge about his secrets.

"Until the next Voldemort comes around, there seems to be one every other generation or so."

"Did you have to sign off on my emancipation? Peter told me that everything to do with me is likely sent to your office."

"Yes I did sign off on it, for reasons that I've mentioned before. I knew it would be a knife in Dumbledore's stomach for you to be able to do as you wished, so I immediately told Edwina to allow it. By then I had been informed of the Snape incident, and that Dumbledore was confident that you wouldn't send him to prison, so I assumed you

would get him on board with your request. Before you ask, if he had opposed your petition I still would have had Edwina approve it.....it just made things easier for Dumbledore to brought around, by whatever means it took.”

“Since you know all the particulars of what happened, do you think Harry made a good deal with Dumbledore?”

“I personally would have asked for more, though I can’t think right off hand what you specifically could have gotten. I’m assuming that you didn’t want to push the old man too far, and perhaps that was for the best. How has life with him been at Hogwarts? Things must be a bit strained right now, I’m sure he tried to talk you out of coming here today.”

“As you said, they’re strained. He’s left me alone for the most part, and I’m having arguably the best start of term that I’ve ever had. No small part of that is due to Snape not being there I’m sure.” Harry checked his watch and saw that he didn’t have much time left before he had to head back to the castle, he would have to bring up Sirius pretty quickly.

“Minister, I’m glad you and I are having this discussion, and it’s been not a little fascinating to hear your views on these matters. I have another question for you, and I assure you I mean no disrespect when I ask it: What is it that you want from me? I mean I have to think there is more to this lunch than your apologies.....which I do accept of course.”

“What do I want? Voldemort has intense interest in you Harry, he’s tried to kill you many times. Lucius always inquired about you as well, ostensibly in regards to healing the difficulties between Draco and yourself.....and no, I didn’t believe that rubbish, I simply thought he hated you on his son’s behalf and wanted dirt on you. I’ve even heard rumors, from whom I will not say, that Voldemort wants you to join him as a Death Eater. Dumbledore once told me that such an offer has been made before, hasn’t it?”

Harry sat there in stunned disbelief, and was silent for a minute as he contemplated what he’d just been told. He wasn’t entirely sure that

Fudge wasn't floating this on his own, to see where exactly he stood.....but still, the rumors made so much sense in the larger scheme of things. Did Voldemort honestly expect him to switch sides? Was this why there were no visions or attacks? Harry had no trouble believing that if Fudge knew all the Order details, Voldemort did too. Since he likely did, that meant he knew about the breach, and there was no doubt in Harry's mind that Voldemort would want to encourage conflict between he and Dumbledore. He cleared his mind and looked at Fudge.

"Yes it has, when we were fighting over the Philosopher's Stone five years ago. He offered to bring my parents back from the dead if I would join him and give him the stone. I refused, and that was that I thought. I'm not going to join him Minister, whatever else happens that I can promise you. I hope you can make the same promise to me." Percy looked affronted at that question, but Fudge didn't bat an eye.

"Yes I can Harry, and as insulting as that question might be to some, I realize that you had to ask it. Getting back to what I want from you: I want us to cooperate in the war, over our friend's head if we have to. I know you're not a member of the Order, and have no intention of joining it. I won't ask you to reconsider that decision, given the tension between you and Dumbledore I don't think it wise to have you in such proximity to him any more than necessary. What I'm asking is a public show of support by you for the Ministry and what we're doing, and to keep me apprised of any details that you think we need to know about what's going on. I'm not talking about Order business, we both have similar sources there I would think.....I'm talking about any outside information that you get. I'm aware of most of the composition of your brain trust, and I respect the minds behind it. I know that such cooperation will not come too easily to you, but I'm asking all the same."

"I have some requests of you Minister, if I am to give such cooperation." Percy couldn't hold back any longer:

"You mean some demands Potter? This is not some auction house where things will be bargained for! The Minister of Magic has

requested your assistance, you should do so out of a sense of duty if nothing else.”

“Thank you for that Percy, it is always interesting to hear your views. You know if not for the fact that you have red hair.....But anyway, Minister there are a few things I would like you to do for me. Don’t consider them payment for my future cooperation, but rather compensation for that which your office has done to me over the past couple of years.”

“I’m listening Harry, please go on.”

“Sirius Black, you are aware of his death?”

“Yes I am, and for what it is worth I’m sorry for you, I know you were very close to him since his escape.”

“Yes I was.....I know that until Peter Pettigrew is captured that there cannot be a formal trial, but I want you to pardon Sirius, posthumously. Say at the press conference that a vast amount of circumstantial evidence has come to light which exonerates him, and that you have responded to pleas from his family and friends to act on it. This will all be true naturally, so it should be easy to say. I’ll be standing with you shoulder to shoulder at that press conference, and I will have nothing but nice things to say about you and what you did. Our current schism or not, I’ll make sure Dumbledore comes as well, and does likewise. A reward should be announced for the capture of Pettigrew, and his capture should be given equal priority with that of Bellatrix Lestrange, right below that of Voldemort himself.”

Fudge contemplated this for a moment, between his stranglehold on The Daily Prophet and Harry’s influence on The Quibbler it would be easy to spin this to the media. Rationally he knew that if Harry believed in Black and disbelieved Pettigrew, that should be enough for most people. They would need to find a way to frame it, and explain why it took so long, but it was nothing that couldn’t be managed.

“Consider it done, we’ll hold the press conference in a couple of weeks. We need to give the news time to settle in before the Death

Eater trials take place. Would you like to take care of Dumbledore's participation, or shall I do it?"

"You meet with him every week don't you?" Seeing a nod, "I would appreciate it if you would do it Minister, the last thing I want is another disagreement with the man and any meeting we have is ripe for them."

"I'll speak to him this week about it. I doubt there's any way he can publicly disagree with it, even if he wanted to. You should know that during your entire fourth year he was lobbying me to do something in regards to Black, in this one case at least he was looking out for what you wanted."

"Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn now and again. Now my next request, I would like you to repeal most of the anti-werewolf legislation that is currently on the books. I would like my friend Remus Lupin, and those like him, to at least be able to hold jobs. Between the four of us, I can somewhat understand not allowing werewolves to teach at Hogwarts, not all of them will have access to the Wolfsbane Potion. Remus does, given his inheritance from Sirius, so perhaps you could specify that those with access to Wolfsbane could do so."

"That I can try to do Harry, but I'm not sure if the votes are there to do so. As you may know, the Wizengamot is quite splintered at the moment, and it takes a 2/3 vote to repeal any law. I will promise that the members who are in my camp will vote your way, and again I am assuming that Dumbledore's bloc will go along with this.....but those two groups alone won't be enough. You'll need to get out front on that topic as well, a few interviews once the subject comes up. All I ask is that we do it after the trials are over, we need the Wizengamot at least somewhat united in advance of those trials."

"Agreed, I'll do whatever I have to do to get it done. The last thing I want from you is pretty easy, and will involve very little effort on your part. I want you to offer the next available promotion in the Ministry to Arthur Weasley, and in the event he refuses I would like him to get a raise in pay equivalent to said promotion. I don't want anyone to be fired because of this, so just wait until an opportunity comes up. This is a purely personal request for personal reasons. He's a wonderful

man, and his sons.....most of them.....are my closest friends. Wouldn't you say that he deserves it Percy?"

Bill looked at Percy very coldly, and almost dared him to disagree with Harry. This was the one subject of the day that Harry and Bill hadn't discussed beforehand, and he knew that his father would be uncomfortable with Harry lobbying for a promotion for him, even if he had long deserved one. It wasn't lost on Bill in the least that all three of Harry's requests (he didn't think there would be any more) were solely for the benefit of other people, and wouldn't do anything tangible for him other than make him happy. Bill knew now more than ever that he had made the right choice when he supported his brother's best friend.

Percy was undergoing an obvious internal struggle, and it amused the others, even his boss, to watch it play out on his face. It was clear that he didn't think his father deserved it, especially after Arthur had said that he only got his own promotion because of Fudge wanting to manipulate him. On the other hand it was just as clear that he didn't want to say this out loud, and risk creating another Harry request that might deal with him.

"My feelings should not be an issue here, the Minister will do what he thinks is best for all."

"I'll take that as your endorsement Percy, I'm happy to agree to that. There are a couple of department heads who are nearing retirement, I'll bring in Arthur for a chat and we'll discuss where he would be happiest. How does that sound?"

"Perfect sir, thank you very much. So ends the list of my requests. I accept all of your apologies, and I will cooperate as much as I can with you against Voldemort." He stood up and reached out his hand to the Minister, who shook it heartily. Bill shook the Minister's hand as well, and smiled at Harry, their plan had worked pretty well.

"I'm glad Harry, I hope this is a turning point in the war, with all of the light side together and cooperative....in a fashion."

"I am too sir, now if you will excuse me, I have Quidditch practice to get to. If you need to communicate with me, do so through Bill or Peter Tyson. I'm watched too closely at Hogwarts, so your notes might be read before I get them."

"As you wish, I'll inform you as soon as the press conference for Black is set up. I'll talk with Madam Bones and have the pardon papers drawn up Monday. A copy of them will be sent to Peter Tyson when they're done. Good day Harry, Bill.....be safe."

"Thank you sir, you too." He walked around the table and leaned over to Percy, "Goodbye Percy, we'll be sure to pass along your good wishes to your mother and father." Bill said nothing, but gave his brother a withering look of contempt as the two of them exited the room. They nodded at the Aurors outside the door and moved through the pub to the door. Bill winked at Harry and called out to no one in particular:

"We're all done Tonks, you can go home now." Snickering, the two headed back to Hogwarts.

Sunday, September 22, 1996

The Executive Council meeting the next day dealt with defending the castle, as Harry produced Winky's masterpiece, a pretty detailed blueprint of Hogwarts castle. The blueprint was based on the Marauder's Map and her own nightly wanderings around the castle (doing research). She had been working on it since school started, leaving all the cleaning to Dobby. Harry explained to her that this was far more important than dusting, and since it was something he wanted her to do, it couldn't count as part of her hobby. She was delighted at the assignment, and worked on it at for many hours each day. The group spent two hours examining the map, making note of all the approaches to the four Common Rooms, the Library, and the Great Hall. The classrooms were spread out to the extent that any invasion of the castle during class time would be unlikely; given that all of Voldemort's people were former Hogwarts students and knew the basic layout, and how hard it would be to corral students from all over the place. Dungeon 7 was proving a nice place to have their meeting, though no spells were fired that day. Members of each

House were assigned the task of poking around their own dormitories, and fixing escape routes and bolt holes. It was agreed that the pro-light Slytherins would hide right there in Dungeon 7, since the Slytherin dormitory was far and away the most vulnerable.

Afterward Harry sat down with Ron, Blaise, and Neville and discussed Fudge. The trio had been scattered the night before and hadn't had much of a chance to discuss the Minister and his surprising affability. They started off speculating that this was all too good to be true, until Blaise brought up the obvious point that Harry hadn't really asked for much. Ron was a bit abashed at first to learn about Percy's intransigence, abashment that quickly grew to anger. Harry had the feeling that another Howler was going to be sent very soon. Blaise confirmed that his father was one of the wildcards in the Wizengamot, but would likely go along with the werewolf repeal if Harry asked him to. Neville was especially looking forward to the trial, he hated all Death Eaters with a passion and couldn't wait to send as many to Azkaban as he could.

The rest of the week passed by without anything extraordinary happening, though a few things made people sit up and take notice. The twin announcements of a Yule Ball and the first Hogsmeade visit caused quite the buzz in the Great Hall on Monday when Dumbledore announced them. The Yule Ball was scheduled for December 20, the last Saturday before Christmas and the day before the train was scheduled to take the students back to Kings Cross for the beginning of their Winter Break. The first Hogsmeade trip was going to be on October 12, or one week after the scheduled press conference about Sirius Black. Harry was surprised that the old man was announcing it so far in advance, one would think that for security purposes they would announce it at the last minute 'oh by the way, it's a Hogsmeade day today'. He was sure Dumbledore had his reasons though, and no doubt Hogsmeade would be full of Aurors and Order members that day.

Another happening was that random first years were having 'accidents' all over the castle. No bones were broken, and it was nothing life threatening, but there were many bruises, torn robes, and scattered school things. All the students, who were comprised of boys and girls from all four Houses, could say is that they didn't remember

anything. They were checked, and all of them showed signs of being Obliviated. The first instinct of many of the professors was to question the Slytherins, except for one problem: of the twelve students attacked during the week, there were two Slytherins.....both of whom had declared for Malfoy during Shepherd's separation speech. All Dumbledore would allow the professors to do is perform a *Priori Incantatem* on certain students wands.....which proved fruitless. That meant that either the suspect net had to be widened, or there were non-registered wands floating around out there. As the faculty didn't seem up to the task of protecting the students, the DA quietly took over and at weeks end began escorting students to and from the library, in large groups.

Harry had been assiduously avoiding Dumbledore all week, and for reasons of his own Dumbledore wasn't looking too hard for Harry either. Very few people knew that Harry had gone out that day, no one had noticed him when he met Bill at the front gate. No clandestine pictures of the lunch appeared in *The Daily Prophet*, Fudge wasn't trying to make political hay out of his new alliance.....yet.

Author's Note: There is no official name for Luna's father listed anywhere, so I felt free to make one up. Hardcore British Football fans will no doubt recognize two of the names I use for Quidditch at the end of the chapter. On another matter, you may have noticed that I rarely describe how anyone looks, particularly among the new characters (Tyson, Bliss, Shepherd, Blaise, etc.). That's done on purpose; I'm hoping you will do the imagining for me and project people you know onto these characters, instead of relying on me arbitrarily choosing physical features for someone.

Sunday, September 29, 1996

2:00 pm

Harry looked out over the Great Hall at the assembled DA meeting; the students had reflexively gotten into their groups right away. Professors Bliss and Flitwick were talking quietly at the Staff table with Bill, who was the 'special guest instructor' for the afternoon. That really was an excuse to get Bill in the building, so that they could talk about the attacks. They met half an hour before the DA meeting was supposed to start, in Bliss' office to try and figure out what was going on. Professor Shepherd told them that Draco's wand was the first one they had tested, but it turned out clean, as were the wands of all the other hardcore Slytherins. For fairness sake, and at Draco's insistence, they had tested Blaise's wand as well, but also found nothing. Dumbledore had specifically prohibited him from using Veritaserum, for some unknown reason, which Charles was perfectly willing to disobey on the sly.....but it turned out that he only had enough for one round of questioning, not thinking he would need so much when he started the term in his new job. After his split meetings two weeks previous he had starting brewing mass quantities (relatively speaking) of the potion, a potion that took thirty days to make. He now had three different cauldrons of it going, at various stages of completion, enough to do some experimenting when the first batch was done.

The two ideas that got the most discussion among the group (Bliss, Harry, Shepherd, Bill, Ron, Blaise, Luna, and Neville) were that someone was using another wand, or there was a Death Eater hiding in the castle. The wand got the most play, since while all of the

victims had certainly been the result of physical violence, they all had been Obliviated. Obliviation was a pretty advanced charm, but nothing that couldn't be taught someone intelligent, given enough time. It wasn't out of the question that Snape himself might have taught Draco, their relationship was confirmed by Blaise as a very close one. Harry was pretty much alone in his view that it might be Peter Pettigrew or one of the Death Eaters, though he was sure of Draco being the inside man. He had gone against his conscience somewhat and sent Colin to the entrance to the secret passage to Honeydukes and had him use it. Colin made it to Honeydukes and back in about an hour, and without incident. Harry was baffled that no one in authority seemed to know about the passage, Hermione must not have been asked that particular question. He was assuming the Pettigrew remembered some secret ways in and out of the castle, and that was the only one that still worked. They were all united in their conviction that Draco had something to do with it, and attacked his own first year allies as a way of distracting the investigation.

The only plan they could come up with right away was to continue the escorting, and instructing all students that they traveled alone in the castle at their peril. Harry also decided to put an alarm charm of his own on the entrance way, with as much volume as he could put in the spell, on the entrance to the passage. He also had Gred and Forge in his trunk, looking at the Marauders Map for any suspicious activity.....particularly around the dungeon area. The twins were just itching to catch Draco doing something heinous, they had loudly complained to Harry about him being the only allowed to take a few shots at Draco on Platform 9 ¾.

Harry continued the lesson from two weeks ago on shield charms, adding a couple of interesting twists. He had the groups of five split in two: two on offense, and three on defense. The two offense people were to fire mild hexes at the three defenders, who were to use shield charms only to defend themselves. The group of defenders to last the longest would get some Chocolate Frogs from a supply that Harry had stashed in his trunk. The winners, who lasted ten minutes before their shields gave out, were: Hermione, a fourth year Slytherin boy named Jonas Abrey, and a fifth year Ravenclaw girl (one of Luna's roommates) named Liz Mullane. Harry handed out the rewards, and he and Hermione shared a smile for the first time in three months.

Harry had, of course, tested this game out with his friends.....he, Luna, and Neville had lasted fourteen minutes against the combined assault of Ron and Ginny (who told them she had been tempted to Bat Bogey them, just to see if the shield would hold against them).

The next phase of the competition was a bit trickier, as he switched them around, and had the three defenders become the attackers, with two defenders this time. The winners, in what should not have been too big a surprise since they were among the older students, were Jack Sloper and Marietta Edgecombe. Jack and Marietta last twelve minutes, and were notable in that they defended themselves by putting one arm around the other's waist so as to overlap the shield, making it more powerful. They got a lot of hoots after they won (no one else got to the eight minute mark), but Jack just slowly ate one of the frogs in front of them.....when you win, you're allowed different strategies. As Harry handed them their prizes, he laid a hand on Marietta's shoulder and grinned at her, one that was returned equally. The inner core champs in this game were Luna and Ginny, who had lasted thirteen minutes against the boys.

The remainder of the lesson was brushing up on Expelliarmus and Petrificus Totalus, spells that Harry told them would be involved in the contest at the next DA meeting. He had decided to do a contest or competition at each meeting, as a kind of bribe to keep them coming and interested. The first bribes seemed to have worked marvelously, as the non-execs left the Hall buzzing about the lessons. Most of the executive council stayed around, chatting with their new friends from other Houses. After most of them had left, Dumbledore walked in to have another chat.....though in relative public this time. Dumbledore dispensed quickly with the pleasantries and addressed Harry.

"Harry, the Minister has informed me of Sirius' pardon and the press conference this coming Friday. It is to be held at the Ministry at 3:00 pm, you and I will take a portkey there. Please be in my office by 2:30 so we can get there on time."

"Terrific sir, I can't wait. I'm sure Sirius will be watching and smiling. Will Remus and Tonks be there as well?"

"Yes they will be.....Do I dare ask what you had to promise the Minister to get this pardon?"

"He didn't tell you? I would have thought he would, nothing of what either of us asked each other for was too harsh.....or harsh at all now that I think of it. Just be glad that justice will be done, or mostly done anyway. Justice truly won't be done until Peter Pettigrew is dead."

"Worry about Voldemort, Harry. Peter is an important Death Eater, but he's not the ultimate goal."

"I'm not really worrying about him.....Ron's going to take care of his old pet, aren't you Ron?"

Ron smiled broadly and nodded his head. He was enjoying the look on the Headmaster's face at their banter.

"You bet, I can't wait to see Scabbers again. When the final battle comes I'll be ready for him."

Dumbledore just shook his head at the folly of headstrong teenagers and turned to go.

"Oh yeah, Professor? Fudge did tell me that you've been pressuring him all this time to do something about Sirius.....I want to let you know that I appreciate it." Dumbledore had never looked so surprised in front of such a large group of students (there were about fifteen still there). He smiled and nodded at Harry, and walked out with Flitwick and a bemused Bliss. Harry waited until they were out of earshot and started laughing.

"That was fun, who says entertainment bargains don't exist anymore."

"You didn't mean what you said to him? That's kind of harsh...." Lisa didn't get very far before Harry started laughing again and interrupted her.

"Oh I meant every word of it, but the look on his face was just priceless. It's also a bit insulting when you think about it, he's

surprised when I'm polite and gracious to him. Has that man learned nothing, good grief."

"He's only human Harry, and given the troubles you two have had lately....."

"Ok Lisa, I get the idea.....and you're right of course. I have been hard on the guy and I would be naïve to think that things are like they were in past years. I just can't see him like I used to though, I always have to keep an eye peeled to make sure he's not manipulating something in my life."

They all went back to their Common Rooms soon after, and Harry and his core met in the twins' trunk. Fred told them that nothing unusual had happened except for one tiny detail: Zach Smith and Draco Malfoy had been near each other for about twenty minutes in the Library. Harry had told all of them before about Justin's and Susan's feelings that Smith might go Dark, and this was more confirmation of that hypothesis. Hufflepuff continued to puzzle Harry, Justin and his fellow insiders had no good explanation for the low turnout at the first DA meeting, the meeting had been well publicized within the House; and Justin had made a verbal announcement about it as well. There just seemed to be a kind of apathy among the younger Hufflepuffs (eighteen of the twenty-one in attendance at the meeting were from the two oldest years). Zach Smith had outwardly been pretty quiet, but he was disappearing on his own every night to locations unknown. It seemed unlikely that he was organizing within the House, as he had very few friends among his own year (Wayne Hopkins was the sixth year he got along with best, it was only a casual friendship at the most, and Hopkins was not a exec council member).

Wednesday October 2, 1996

As Transfiguration ended Professor McGonagall asked Harry to stay behind for a few moments, and shooed Neville and Ron out of the room, after which she closed the door and threw a quick Silencing Charm at it. Harry looked at her quizzically and with faint alarm, it wasn't typical of her to be like this. She had to know he would tell Ron and Neville whatever she said anyway.

"Harry, I asked you to stay behind because I would like to talk with you about Ms. Granger." Harry immediately had no interest in this line of conversation, it pissed him off to no end that yet another faculty member was trying this. He knew he couldn't afford to have her as an enemy, though.....so he left out the anger out of his voice that he was feeling at that moment.

"I'm sorry ma'am but, with all due respect, who I choose to have as my friends is none of anyone's business but mine. I know you mean well....."

"I'm well aware of that Harry, and I'm not talking about that exactly. What I'm talking about is the shunning of her by Gryffindor House, and as the Head of Gryffindor House that is certainly my business. On some level I can understand that you don't trust her as much as you used to.....though I feel you've exaggerated the 'betrayal' somewhat. What I'm talking about is that I've yet, after over a month, to see anyone other than the first years talking to her. I'm talking with you about it, because let's face it: you're the student leader of our House, whatever the Prefect assignments are."

"Professor, I can assure you that I haven't advocated any public or private shunning of Hermione. No announcement of any kind was made about her by me at any time to the House in general. Without giving you any private details, I did have the word spread that we couldn't trust her with most DA information, as the rest of the sixth years, along with Katie, Ginny, and the Creevey brothers, are among the mentors that I've set up."

"Who do you think she would betray you to? Surely you don't see her as potentially Dark do you? Even if Voldemort would have a Muggle born I just can't see it."

"Professor McGonagall, I don't treat you as a fool, please extend me the same courtesy. We both know that I'm talking about her telling our secrets to Professor Dumbledore and, to a lesser extent, to you. Now I'm not saying that we're doing anything illegal mind you.....but sure as Hagrid loves dangerous creatures you and I both know that Dumbledore will concoct some reason to go back on our deal, and

therefore I don't believe that you people need to know everything of what we're doing."

"You really don't trust us? I know you and the Headmaster aren't on the best of terms, but you're painting all of us with the same brush, and I don't think that appropriate. You cannot adopt an adversarial attitude with the faculty, especially in regards to a school club that we allow you to have."

"I don't want that, believe me.....but you people follow Dumbledore so blindly, that telling you something is the same as telling him something, and I do not trust him. Tell me I'm wrong ma'am."

"Can you not forgive him Harry? He really thought he was working in your best interests, even though his results were I admit a tad uneven. Don't say it, I know him putting you with your relatives was a bad idea, and I told him so at the time.....but is it unforgivable? Is what Hermione did so unforgivable?"

"It would much easier to forgive them if they admitted that what they did was wrong, and that's the crux of this entire situation. Ron and I had it out with Hermione on the night we arrived here. Now just in case your listening charm didn't provide you with what happened, let me tell you that she did not apologize for what she did, not in any way. She even had the nerve to say that I wasn't ready for the kind of freedom that I want. The same with Dumbledore, he only agreed to what I wanted because I had Snape to hold over his head. There were times I could tell that he wanted to call what he thought was my bluff, and dare me to send Snape to prison for ten years....which I very happily would have done. By the same token, a simple apology from Hermione would go a long way toward mending the fences within Gryffindor, but she has shown no inclination to do it. You may or may not believe this, but there are certain of my friends, who will remain nameless, who want to hex her into next week for what she did. Let me tell you, there are times when it's all I can do to talk them out of it. Dumbledore has apologized, I will grant him that, but he apologized because he got caught.....and because I had him put in a position where it was apologize or lose his job.....he needs a few more months of good behavior before I even consider starting to believe in him again. And you never answered my question ma'am,

am I wrong in thinking that whatever I tell you, or Professor Flitwick, or Hagrid, goes right to him?"

"You're not wrong about Hagrid, and I don't know about Professor Flitwick, since from what I have witnessed you don't confide in him. As for me.....I will acknowledge that the Headmaster isn't perfect, and he has made some grave mistakes over the years. I have not in fact called him on those mistakes as I should have much of time, which I regret. He is our leader though Harry, and if I cannot trust him I don't know who else to turn to. You've seen over the years what our options have been, any contest between him, Fudge, and Barty Crouch Sr. was and is an easy one to judge. But to answer your question, if you tell me something in confidence, I will keep it there.....but otherwise, I report to him. He needs to know what is going on so that he can lead the Order in the best way possible." McGonagall paused for a moment, and tried to frame what she wanted to say next.

"Let us leave aside Professor Dumbledore for the moment. Harry, I'm worried about Hermione, that's what this whole talk is about. She seems so lonely and sad; even you must have noticed this. Isn't there some way you can extend an olive branch to her? I would consider it a great favor if you would do so."

Harry looked at the appeal in her eyes, and listened to the emotion in her voice and was hard put to deny what she wanted. He had long known that Hermione was McGonagall's favorite student, so this wasn't terribly surprising. Still, he knew it would be a hard sell with Ron and Ginny in particular, but he felt that he could talk them into it.

"Are you asking me alone? Or are you asking me on behalf of my friends as a whole? The difference is very important I can assure you."

"Your actions drive those of your friends, if you were to thaw to her, I have no doubt the Weasley siblings will follow you, as will Neville."

"I think you overestimate that ma'am, but I won't argue the point." He sighed, he knew that this was going to cause problems, but McGonagall deserved to have him at least try. "OK, I'll put out the

word that she shouldn't be shunned.....purely as a favor to you ma'am, I have my doubts about doing it in and for itself. However, I will not guarantee any results Professor.....I just can't see myself pressuring anyone to be nice to her, but I will make an effort myself."

"Thank you Harry, I would appreciate the effort, even if it does not pay off in the end."

"May I ask why you didn't want Neville and Ron in here for this talk? You know I'm going to tell them everything anyway."

"I didn't want them in here because of your particular group of friends: you, Neville, Ron, and Ginny.....you are the most intelligent and reasonable, and you would likely at least hear me out better if we talked alone."

Harry just shook his head at an opinion he thought was full of dung. He personally thought that Neville was the most reasonable of the bunch, outside of Luna, who inexplicably wasn't mentioned by McGonagall.

"Fair enough ma'am; I'll see what I can do. Now I have a question for you, something I've been wondering for a few weeks now. This isn't a deal or anything, so feel free not to answer if you don't want to. Why are Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson still Prefects after all they pulled last year?"

"I honestly don't know Harry, it mystifies me as well. The Headmaster chose not to make any changes, and Professor Shepherd wanted to get to know the students before he did any fiddling. I'm told that he has threatened Malfoy especially with harsh discipline if he abuses his authority, but the line has not yet been crossed to my knowledge. I know that you have become good friends with a few of the nicer Slytherins, and I'm glad for it.....just tell them to be patient."

"Thank you Professor, at least my friends and I aren't the only ones who wonder about it."

McGonagall scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Harry, "Here is a note for Professor Sprout, you should to class now Harry,

and thank you." He nodded at her and went off to Herbology, shaking his head and muttering darkly.

Ron and Ginny were predictable in their responses to what McGonagall had asked, Ginny even confessed to tripping Hermione a few times on the sly, though she was sure that Hermione didn't know who did it. Neville didn't say much, though he did allow that he felt a bit sorry for the shunning. Harry told them bluntly that he wasn't going to argue with them about it, nor was he going to try to tell them what to do either. He pointed out that the favor didn't require the five of them to talk to Hermione; they just had to loosen the chains on the other students in the House. He did ask them to spread the word as he had promised, that Hermione could at least be talked to. He pointed out to them that McGonagall had done a lot for them over the years, and one favor to her wouldn't kill them. After a lot more grousing the Weasleys agreed to tell people that talking to her wouldn't be seen as disloyal. Harry privately told Luna that this was likely to blow up in their faces, but what else was there to do?

Friday, October 4, 1996

The press conference, at the Ministry of Magic, announcing the pardon of Sirius Black went without a hitch; Harry felt that it was another valuable lesson in his continuing political education. It wasn't that he had any interest in going into politics itself, but he knew that in the months ahead he was going to have to get savvier about it, especially once the werewolf legislation was brought up in the Wizengamot. The entire notion of a press conference to begin with had confused him, as he thought there were only three publications of any kind in Wizarding Britain: The Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, and The Quibbler. It turned out that not only did those three publications send more than one person (The Daily Prophet sent six), many of the leading papers of Europe and North America did as well; apparently Sirius Black was a big deal, news-wise. Also there was the WWN, the Wizarding Wireless Network, who were carrying the press conference live.

Fudge was at his best in such a situation it turned out, he had a very nice patter going with the assembled journalists, it was clear he had dealt with many of them in the past. Flanked on either side by Harry

and Percy, with Dumbledore off to the side with Tonks and Remus, he spent about ten minutes laying out his reasoning for granting the pardon. He talked with seeming frank honesty about the decision not to give Sirius a trial in the first place, and admitted that while he was not Minister at the time, he had agreed with the decision. He spoke of Harry and the way he had found out about his godfather, and how he had gotten to know him. He turned angry when he told of Peter Pettigrew, ‘The Great Betrayer’ is how he termed him. ‘Mistakes were made, but now we’re correcting them’ seemed to be the theme of the new and improved Cornelius Fudge, and judging by the reactions of the assembled media, it was playing very well.

After his initial statement, he had invited Harry to say a few words. Harry responded with a carefully prepared statement, mostly written by Luna. He had memorized and rehearsed it though, and it somehow made it appear to be mostly off the cuff (five times rehearsing it front of his friends the night before certainly helped the performance). He started off by talking about the relationship between Sirius and his parents, and the horror of having them betrayed by another one of their close friends. He told them a few brief stories about Sirius the man, his unbounded love for his friends and family, and his undying hatred for Voldemort and all Death Eaters. He went extremely easy on Fudge, saying that after a rocky beginning, he and the Minister had reached an accord, and were well on their way to becoming friends; as well as already being allies in the war against Voldemort. He tried hard to avoid laying it on too thick, but he did feel an obligation to keep to his deal with Fudge, after all the man had totally lived up to his part of it thus far (Harry privately felt that of the three things he had asked for, this was by far the most important of the bunch).

Dumbledore was the press conference in body only, as he was not among the speakers (Amelia Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new Head Auror, also made brief statements). Inside he was happy about the result; Sirius getting his named cleared had been a goal of his for over two years now. The issue he had was how it had come about, what was Fudge up to? The easy answer was that he was using Harry to prop up his own career, but there had to be more to it than that. Until a few weeks ago the Minister had been adamant that nothing could be done without Peter Pettigrew being caught, even if

he had come to terms with the fact that Pettigrew was a traitor and that Black was innocent. But once Harry asked him to do it, Fudge couldn't write the pardon fast enough. The old man dearly wanted to have another private chat with Harry, preferably with the boy under the influence of Veritaserum, to find out what the Fudge meeting had accomplished. Dumbledore had a hard time understanding how forgiving Harry could be to Fudge, who had done little but try to harm him over the last three years.....but so unforgiving to himself, who had only wanted what was best. He had largely ignored Harry's reasoning of when you trust someone implicitly, you tend to be more hurt when they betray it.

He turned to look at Remus, who was quite twitchy today, he had confessed to Dumbledore that this was a day he hardly thought possible without an accompanying capture of Peter Pettigrew. Remus was thinking about how proud Sirius would be of his godson. Harry had proven time and time again that he would go to any length to protect Sirius.....whether it would be taking a ride on temperamental Hippogriff, meeting him secretly in caves or through the floo, or risking his life at the Department of Mysteries. Now Harry had made a deal with Fudge, likely one he hadn't especially wanted to make....all to clear his godfather's name. Sirius had died for Harry, and there was no doubt in his mind that Harry would have done the same for his godfather. Remus and Harry were writing once a week or so, and he was making a point to stop by the shop every so often to touch base with the twins. He and Molly and Arthur were becoming closer as well, as they all agreed that Dumbledore had removed them from the inner workings of the Order. They speculated on what he could be up to that he would want to hide from them, and by extension, Harry. The three of them weren't telling Order things to Harry, indeed only Remus was in direct contact with him. They all assumed that the twins and Bill filled him in though, and perhaps that was where it was coming from.

Tonks was very quiet and contemplative while listening to the speeches, standing next to her parents. She was still pretty angry at Harry for forcing things with Dumbledore the way he had, and for attacking her outside the Leaky Cauldron. Tonks' pride had taken a beating after that incident, even though she understood that she hadn't done anything obvious to give herself away, Harry had just

been smart. Moody had told her that she was behaving childishly, Harry was so paranoid lately that the lad couldn't be sure exactly who was following him, and it was far wiser to attack first and ask questions afterward. She was rising rapidly in the hierarchy of the Order, and along with Kingsley and Moody was among Dumbledore's trusted subordinates. There were still pangs of regret when she saw how the Weasleys were being marginalized, but they had chosen their side. She liked Harry quite well as a person, and quite agreed that many mistakes had been made in raising him.....but she couldn't stomach the idea of following a sixteen year old kid in a war, final weapon or not. So she did what she could to make sure the kid didn't do anything stupid, get himself killed. Voldemort had been so quiet these last couple of months that there was little else to do.

After the speeches were done, the floor was opened to ask Fudge a few questions; it had been in the handout earlier that Harry was not going to be answering any press questions today.....which pleased both Harry and Fudge to no end; Fudge because it meant that the spotlight would be more on him, Harry because he well knew he wasn't yet a savvy enough a public speaker to handle a barrage of questions. He planned on giving an interview to Luna's father if he wanted one, but he didn't share that with Fudge. There weren't any hard questions thrown at Fudge, and he handled the softball questions that he did get rather easily. About an hour after the conference started, Fudge declared it to be over and everyone went on their way.....except for Harry, who was taken aside (to Dumbledore's visible annoyance) by the contingent from The Quibbler: Rita Skeeter, and Joseph Lovegood.

Harry greeted them both in a very friendly way; he still harbored some resentment toward Rita for trying to ruin his life with some of her articles, but he had to admit that her Quibbler article had gone a long way toward saving his bacon with his fellow students last year. Harry hadn't spent a ton of time over the summer with Mr. Lovegood, who was quite busy with his paper most of the time, but they got along very well. During one of their few private talks Joe, as he insisted Harry call him, confessed that he was relieved that Luna had found someone else to confide in and make her happy. He loved his daughter very much, but had been concerned about her lack of friends, and the fact that she talked so little about Hogwarts during

her summer vacations.....until this one. While he disapproved the DOM incident in principle, he was appreciative of the effect it, and Harry, had on Luna.

Sensing Dumbledore's impatience, the two of them asked Harry a few hurried questions about Sirius (sorry, Stubby Boardman). He arranged for them to talk more with Remus about what Sirius was like when he was younger, and for some stories of the Marauder exploits at Hogwarts. Joe told him that he would send some more question via a letter to Luna, and Harry promised him a return letter as soon as possible. He asked Joe to go over and talk to Dumbledore for a few moments while he spoke with Rita. While Joe was quickly exasperating the Headmaster (something about goblin pies and who was doing the baking), Harry filled in Rita on the schism with Hermione. He didn't do this to get it in print; he did it to warn her that her beetle secret was no longer secure. She assured him that she had since registered her animagus form with the Ministry, but would hold off revenge on Hermione for her blackmail unless the girl did something first. That taken care of, Harry walked over to Dumbledore and they soon left.

Saturday October 12, 1996

The first Hogsmeade Day was upon them, and there was a buzz at lunch. Part of the buzz was from the very excited third years, most of whom were getting their first glimpses of Hogsmeade, having heard much about it during their first two years. The older students were looking forward to the visit as well, as a nice change of pace from the ever increasing piles of homework, or the long grueling Quidditch practices (Gryffindor practiced on Saturday mornings now). There were usually only four trips to the village per year, and they were to be savored. The only ones not looking forward to the day were the younger two years, and it wasn't merely from jealousy.....it was from fear. There had been eight more beatings during the week, again all of them first years. This was down from the dozen that had been assaulted each of the last two weeks, but that could be chalked up to increased vigilance.....one might even say 'constant' if one so chose. This week there were none among them from Gryffindor, as the Prefects (privately encouraged by Harry) had adopted a draconian attitude toward their own first years, not allowing them out of the

Common Room after dinner unless escorted by at least two executive council DA students, who were stingy about going on any trips unless they had something to do at the destination as well. There was nary a whimper from the eleven year olds about this policy, as they had no interest in being anyone's punching bags any longer. Anthony and Padma had adopted a similar strategy in Ravenclaw, though there were some first years in their House who slipped out of the net. The angry letters from parents were starting to come in, especially from the parents of one Hufflepuff boy who had been attacked three times, even though he insisted he could fight back and would not listen when told to stay in groups.

The incidents had gotten to the point that Harry was considering expanding the number of people who knew about the Marauders Map, so that someone could be eyeing it at all times. He was loathe to do so though (among the students, only his inner circle, along with his three Slytherin allies knew about the Map), for much the same reasons as the trunk floo: Privacy, and secrecy. He decided that some night soon he was going to have to go hunting with the Map, but that could wait. Gryffindor was now secure, and the other Houses had been given a blueprint for doing so, if they chose to use it. The faculty was doing patrols of the halls, but there was a lot of space to cover, and not that many teachers to do it.

After lunch Harry and his group made their way to the front of the castle, where Filch (who had been pretty quiet this year so far, rumor had it that Dumbledore had told him to lay off the students if he wanted to keep his job, after last year's fiasco with the whips and chains) was waiting to let the students out the front doors. Harry, Ron, and Neville met up with Susan, Luna, Tracey, and Blaise and Daphne (who were a couple themselves). Ginny and Dean were spending the day with Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender, not expecting any serious drama to occur. Neville and Tracey eyed each other nervously; this date had been arranged by a now giggling Susan and Daphne during Charms earlier in the week. Neville hadn't minded the matchmaking per se, he was far too nervous around girls to actually have the guts to ask one out, he was grateful to his friends for doing the hard part for him. Tracey, for her part, also welcomed it. She had long liked Neville as a person (something she didn't dare say within Slytherin the last five years), and was looking forward to getting to know him

better. This was also the first official date for Ron and Susan, though they had been a couple for a few weeks now. Ron's wages from WWW over the summer were about to spent some, as he had told Harry that the two of them would separate at some point to have some time alone. Harry and Luna spent quite a lot of time alone (though still always clothed), so they weren't worried about having any private time today. Harry had reassured Neville that he wouldn't leave him and Tracey alone unless asked to.

They started their day with a leisurely walk through the village, and for awhile Harry was indulging in his favorite viewing pastime: looking for signs of Tonks. He was also interested to see how many Order members would be around, either openly or discreetly. He knew that he shouldn't be worrying about such things on a day like today, walking hand in hand with his wonderful girlfriend.....but a part of him was stressing constant vigilance. He had resisted temptation to ask Fred and George to hang around the village that day as an extra double set of eyes. He didn't want to lean on them too often for that sort of thing, they were his close friends not his security force; surely they deserved a Saturday to themselves. The eight of them ambled slowly toward Honeydukes, which was always the highlight of the day for Ron. They passed by Zonko's Joke Shop, but didn't go into it, out of loyalty to the twins. An hour alone was spent in Honeydukes, as they hunted down and bought products that weren't readily available in Diagon Alley. Harry also had a special bag set aside for Roy Figgar and Sarah Owen, his too-young-for-Hogsmeade Quidditch teammates, who he had taken a liking to and wanted to help out. They left the shop with large bags of candy and relatively lighter bags of money, as the boys shrunk all the bags and put them in their pockets. Along the way out, however, they heard a familiar voice:

"Well hello there Potter, fancy seeing you here." Out from the shadow of the Post Office came the tall, greasy haired former Potions instructor.....a face that only Harry among them had laid eyes on since the end of last term. Harry was momentarily startled, but then started smiling as he knew his back was amply protected: not only by his seven friends, but by his wand rights (using magic by underage students within Hogsmeade was considered a gray area; spells were considered acceptable, but hexes and curses were not, unless in self defense).

"Well hello there Snape, it's been over two months since I got you sacked hasn't it? I've so missed having you around. Ron was just telling me the other day how Potions is such a chore with a decent teacher, who's fair minded and actually wants all of his students to learn. That must be rough."

"Amusing as always, Potters and their need to be funny. Tell me, how is your godfather lately? I haven't seen him at any functions."

"What functions would those be, grease ball? Are you referring to the Order of the Phoenix?" Snape looked even meaner than usual at that statement (only the Slytherins on hand could ever really recall looking friendly, and even that was relative).

"What right do you have to just bandy that name about in public like that Potter! I knew it was a mistake to allow you access to any information, you should have been left to rot with your pathetic relatives. And you three (pointing at Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey), I'm beyond ashamed to see three Slytherins willingly spending time with this trash." Blaise strode up to his old Head of House, looked him right in the eye, and said some things he had wanted to say for almost five years now.

"You know Harry's right, I have missed having you around. I've missed being part of a House that is universally reviled, with everyone tarred with the same hated brush. I've missed being thought of a twin of your illegitimate son Draco Malfoy, just because I happen to be in Slytherin. Hogwarts is so much better and happier without you there Snape, I'm only sorry that you're not in Azkaban." He poked him in the chest with his finger, and turned his back, as everyone fervently hoped that Snape would draw his wand and give them an excuse. He didn't yet though, but one could tell that he was dying to. Harry smirked at his enemy, and decided to have a little fun.

"Why shouldn't I tell them about The Order of the Phoenix? (He said the name a bit louder than normal) Perhaps you might have more members if more people knew about it. Then again, once the new members meet you they might rethink their decision. Why

Dumbledore still trusts a traitor like you is beyond anyone's comprehension."

"You truly are the most ungrateful moron I've ever met, Dumbledore has risked so much on your behalf, and yet you treat him...." He didn't get a chance to finish that before Ron interrupted him:

"Like you treated Gryffindors? You've treated us so badly for so long that maybe it's rubbing off on us. Not really though, since Harry wouldn't stoop as low as you do. You're filth Snivellus; please draw your wand so we can show you just how much we think of you."

Snape's normally pale face went red with rage as he heard someone call him that name, Potter had clearly told his friends about the pensieve incident. Snape wasn't stupid however, and he knew that unleashing the combined hatred of eight pretty advanced and powerful students was not a wise move on his part. He was saved from his predicament however, by the arrival of Hagrid, who had been one of the teachers on patrol today (half were on Hogsmeade duty, the other half were on castle duty to prevent any more beatings there).

"What's going on here? Snape, what have you done now?"

Relieved though he was at the distraction, Snape resented Hagrid's presence, and pretty much everything the big oaf had to say. Harry gave Hagrid a faint smile, as his entire group greeted the Gamekeeper/Professor. None of them had their wands out, so there appeared to be no immediate threat.

"Hello Hagrid, Snape didn't do anything in particular.....he was just being himself. We've been catching up on old times. Now if you'll excuse us, we have some relaxing and socializing to do.....and the smell is kind of rank around here." He was looking at Snape when he said that, and hoped that Hagrid wouldn't think he was talking about him. Harry found it hard to be mad at Hagrid, even if the large man was still avoiding him whenever possible. The only thing that made it palatable is that he didn't seem angry at Harry; the man probably just didn't want to be put in the middle. Harry missed the easy companionship he had with Hagrid, but wasn't terribly interested in listening to anyone constantly defending Dumbledore; and he

suspected, Hermione. That would be a fascinating discussion, he wondered if Hermione was still spending time with Hagrid after she got an 'A' on her Care of Magical Creatures OWL. Was Hermione so lonely that she could put academics aside? He hoped so in a way, he didn't want the poor girl to have no friends at all. As he walked past him he leaned over so that Snape, and Snape only, could hear his words.

"I don't care how much Dumbledore prizes your spying, I haven't forgotten for one second that you attacked me this summer. One day I'll catch you when we're alone, with no witness; and Voldemort or not, I'll finish you off once and for all. My parents and my godfather will be able to rest much easier when I do. Now go to hell Snivellus."

They got away without further incident, with vast merriment at the look on Snape's face, as they began to split up. Ron and Susan went toward Madam Puddifoot's, where they would have their first official date. Blaise and Daphne, a couple for over a year now, wandered toward The Three Broomsticks, where everyone would meet up in a couple of hours. Harry, Luna, Neville, and Tracey went up to the Shrieking Shack. Tracey hadn't known their destination, and the other three had a fun time teasing her about what was waiting for her there in the haunted house. She was flabbergasted when Harry led the way inside, where Dobby and Winky were waiting with a picnic lunch of pizza and Coke. Tracey had never had either before, but like every normal person grew to love them instantly. They dined on the rickety table in the main room, and spent a couple of hours swapping stories.

Harry told her the story of Remus Lupin and the Marauders, and how they came to use the Shrieking Shack as their hideaway during Remus' werewolf transformations. She took special interest in the accounts of the pranks and fights between the Marauders and Snape and his buddies. She knew that Snape hated Harry of course, but until the picnic didn't really know why. They also traded anecdotes about Draco Malfoy, she eagerly listened to them vividly describe Moody/Crouch Jr. turning him into a ferret, as she had been far enough ahead of him in the hall that she hadn't seen any of it. She told the three of them how pompous Draco acted in the Common Room (big surprise), but the shocker was when she told them that in Draco's first two years the upperclassmen wouldn't let him get away

with it. Oh they subscribed to his anti-Muggleborn views, but they felt that a young pup like him shouldn't talk so much. He had even been beaten up a couple of times during his first year, when he wouldn't show deference to the older students. Crabbe and Goyle were tough kids, but they couldn't defend themselves physically against sixteen and seventeen year olds at that point. Eventually Snape had been forced to intervene, and Draco had quieted down for a time.

While the girls were off by themselves chatting for a bit (powdering their noses and such things), Harry asked Neville if he wanted some time alone with Tracey, as they seemed to get along very well so far. Neville allowed that he would, he agreed that Tracey seemed to like him, and he clearly liked her (Harry could see this, poor Neville was blushing like crazy). Harry quickly went to the tunnel and had the elves seal it (he didn't know the particular charm to do so); he didn't want to give Pettigrew another route into Hogwarts. Once that was done, the elves popped away and Harry looked at Neville in a calculating way. The girls came back, and Harry quickly announced that he and Luna would go outside for a slow walk to The Three Broomsticks, where everyone was to meet in half an hour. Before Luna could open her mouth they were out the door. She looked strangely at him, but started giggling when he told her why they left in such a hurry. They laughed at their revenge on Neville, who had done much the same thing at the Dursleys.

Everyone met up at The Three Broomsticks as planned, with everyone staring the trace of lipstick on Neville's face. Tracey looked the most embarrassed when she saw it, but proudly took Neville's hand, though not before wiping off the faint smudge off of his face. They all enjoyed a butterbeer before heading back to Hogwarts. On their way out, they spotted something of a shocker: Hermione sitting at a table with the Creevey brothers, chatting amicably. Harry didn't know whether to be amused or angered by it, not angered in jealousy mind you, but because he had a sneaking suspicion that they were taking it upon themselves to spy on her for him. Harry in no way wanted that, at least not on his behalf. His official, and unofficial, position for his own self was to be scrupulously correct when it came to dealing with Hermione: no spells, no nasty words, and no interference with what she did on a daily basis unless it directly involved him. He knew from his conversations with McGonagall and

Dumbledore that they were watching him for signs of bad treatment toward her, and he wanted to remain above any unpleasantness, at least on that subject. He didn't mind what anyone else did for themselves, Ginny still tripped Hermione occasionally, but he wasn't her boss and wouldn't tell her to stop. Indeed, while the rest of the House was treating Hermione noticeably better, Ron and Ginny only seemed to hate her more. They had rather enjoyed Hermione's shunning as it turned out, and were irritated that McGonagall was intervening like that.....especially when she hadn't done so on Harry's behalf during his second (when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin), fourth (when people accused him of seeking publicity by trying to get into the Tri-Wizard Tournament), and fifth years (pretty much all year). Harry had noted this as well, but decided not to bring it up quite yet to McGonagall.....he only would if she came to him again saying that what was happening wasn't enough and that he needed to do more on Hermione's behalf.

When he got to the castle he found out that Colin and Dennis came upon her in Dervish and Bangs and simply felt sorry for her, and offered to buy her a butterbeer. The three of them had talked about muggle things the whole time, Harry's name never came up. There also had been no attacks while the majority of the students had been in Hogsmeade, which heartened every one coming in from a windy and chilly day.

The rest of the month passed by very quietly. Due to increased security and caution, only a couple of students were beaten up each week....all of them too foolhardy to listen to their elders when it came to wandering around the castle. Harry decided that he needed more than books to teach him Defense, so he approached both of the new Professors and asked them for some private tutoring: Bliss in Auror tactics, and Shepherd in Judo. Both had agreed to give him once a week (per person) lessons in those areas, as long as it was kept private from the rest of the faculty and from the general student population. They didn't want their fellow teachers to know how close they were getting to Harry, and they just didn't want the hassle of a hundred students asking them for the same lessons. They arranged to meet Monday and Tuesday nights in their respective offices for the lessons.

During the last week in October Harry got a very interesting letter from a man named Craig Bellamy. Bellamy was the manager for the Welsh National Quidditch Team, and he wrote Harry to see if he was interested in trying out for the squad. World Cup qualifying was to start the following April, and the team was scheduling individual tryouts for the various positions. Bellamy mentioned in his letter that he had played against Harry's father in league games, though he had yet to see Harry play in person.

After initially being a bit confused (he wasn't Welsh was he?), he remembered that his birthplace in Godric's Hollow was in Wales, and that his father must have been at least part Welsh. Bellamy's note anticipated some of that confusion, and he included an explanation: The nationality rules for Quidditch were similar to those in British soccer: there wasn't an official team representing Great Britain, instead there were three teams; England, Scotland, and Wales (in soccer there was also a team representing Northern Ireland, but Wizards don't recognize political/religious schisms like that, so the Northern Irish represented Ireland itself in Quidditch competition). Harry qualified both as English and Welsh for Quidditch competition; though once he represented one in international competition he couldn't change his mind and switch to the other. Harry had often daydreamed about playing in the Quidditch World Cup someday, but never thought that it could come this soon.

He noted the part about having to choose, and immediately dispatched a letter to his old Quidditch Captain, Oliver Wood, asking for advice. He planned on seeking out Angelina's advice on this as well (Alicia Spinnet had chosen not to pursue a professional Quidditch career and was apprenticing at The Daily Prophet), she had had no hard feelings about the Howler. On the surface it was an interesting dilemma: he was a lot more likely to make the Wales team right away, and would play a lot he was sure. On the other hand England, despite it's less than stellar performance two years earlier, was a lot more likely to make the finals.....even if he would have to wait until his twenties for a good chance to make the team. He also wrote back to Craig Bellamy, asking for details about the tryout and what he would have to do. He also wrote to John Terry, the manager of the English National Quidditch Team, asking for advice about the

pursuit of a professional Quidditch career, though he did not mention the possibility of a tryout.

He got his first letter back a couple of days later, as Oliver wrote back to him. Oliver, who was now in his first year as the starting Keeper at Puddlemere United (James Potter's old team), advised Harry to wait until the 2002 World Cup buildup, and decide then. He told Harry that in his opinion Harry would have little trouble making the Welsh team, but it would be worth it to have a couple of professional seasons under his belt to see just how good he was. If he proved to be as good as everyone thought, he might be able to make the more competitive English team. Life was all about options he said, and he should keep all of his open for Quidditch. Harry knew that he didn't have to make a decision right now, or even before the end of the year probably. This was something to think about though; professional Quidditch was looking better and better as a career opportunity. Given that he had played only one game in the last two years, he wondered how rusty he would be after all that time. Practice and pickup games were one thing, but the real game was the difference.

Soon enough replies from Bellamy and Terry came back. Bellamy said this his tryout could happen any time Harry wished, though perhaps it would better if he got a game or two this season under his belt. Bellamy told him that he was the President and General Manager of the Chudley Cannons, which Harry couldn't wait to show Ron, and that the tryout would be at the team's pitch. John Terry wrote back inviting Harry to have lunch with him sometime during the Winter Holiday, and he would be happy to answer any questions that Harry might have about the selection process for both the professional league, and for the National Team. He told Harry that while England was reasonably set at Seeker for the next World Cup, they were always on the lookout for future players, he said that he had seen Harry play a few times and was quite impressed.

Practice for the Gryffindor Quidditch squad was going better than Harry and Katie had feared it would. The Beaters were all rounding into shape nicely, as was Ron in goal. The Chasers were coming around a bit slower than had been hoped, but there was a lot of potential there. Natalie especially was excelling as a Chaser, a position she hadn't really practiced at over the summer. Harry got her

included in one of the mass pickup games that were becoming a weekend ritual, and she held her own very nicely. The first game was scheduled to be Ravenclaw versus Slytherin, on Saturday November 2nd.....the first Gryffindor game would be one week later against the Hufflepuffs, who were now captained by Justin. Those were the only two games scheduled during the remainder of the calendar year, Harry hoped that by the time his game came around he would be celebrating the life imprisonment of Lucius Malfoy.

Author's Note: While I was re-reading parts of Order of the Phoenix, doing my fact checking, I found something interesting: Gregory Goyle's father is not listed among the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries (and JK gives at least last names to all twelve of them). So please no screaming that I forgot him. I'm also operating under the assumption that of the twelve, only Bellatrix escaped.

And in an earlier chapter I made what might be a huge canon error : The Dementors may or may not have joined Voldemort in January 1996 when Bellatrix and her boys broke out. The HP Lexicon says that they did, but I re-read the relevant pages of Order of the Phoenix, and it does not specifically mention that the Dementors revolted, only that the Death Eaters escaped. Since none of you brought it up at the time, I'm assuming that you all thought as I did that they were still there, given that JK did not state it outright. This is one instance where I'm going to have to go against the Lexicon and stick to the storyline that I've already written, even though logic says they are probably right.

Saturday, November 1, 1996

The air around the Great Hall was abuzz with anticipation. The first Quidditch game of the year, Slytherin versus Ravenclaw was today. The team members in each House sat together and looked darkly at the other side, while the normal friendly wagering that usually went on between the two Houses was oddly absent (Ravenclaw historically being the House that got along best with Slytherin), as the pro-light Slytherins seemed torn today about who to root for. It was common knowledge that the Slytherin team was entirely made up of pro-Malfoy sixth and seventh years, Captain of the team Draco Malfoy hadn't had tryouts and had just picked his friends and allies for the squad. How this would work on the pitch was anyone's guess, but it would be an interesting show against a veteran Ravenclaw team, led by Cho Chang.

The fans made their way to the Quidditch field, as most everyone was enjoying the early afternoon diversion from their studies. Harry, Neville, Ron, and Ginny all sat together in the Gryffindor section, but were wearing borrowed Ravenclaw scarves for the day as a show of solidarity with their friends. Luna sat with Terry and Lisa in the

Ravenclaw section, today she wanted to show that she was a full fledged supporter of her House, especially given her increased acceptance. Her roommates had seemingly gotten over their jealousy and were including her more and more in their activities (this was borne out also by the lack of information from Mandy and Lisa's Listening Charms). Notable for their absences were Hermione (who rarely went to non-Gryffindor games) and the anti-Malfoy Slytherins. Blaise had told Harry that morning while jogging that he and his allies couldn't stomach the idea of rooting for Malfoy to win, but couldn't bring themselves to cheer against their own House either.....so they took the third fork in the road and decided not to show up at all.

Colin Creevey was the new announcer this year, replacing Lee Jordan. Lee had been offered the opportunity to continue with the job, but had declined. His reason was that someone had to manage the shop on the weekends that Gryffindor was playing, as Fred and George would certainly want to attend the games. Colin started off by introducing the Slytherin team:

"Welcome ladies and gentleman to the first Quidditch game of the season, Slytherin versus Ravenclaw! Here come the teams now. First on to the pitch is Slytherin, led by Captain and Seeker Draco Malfoy (the amount of booing and hissing was notable during this introduction). Also playing for Slytherin today are Beaters Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe.....Keeper Theo Nott.....and Chasers Sean Touchet, Matthew Miller, and Neil McCauley.

"And here come the Ravenclaws! They are led by Captain and Seeker Cho Chang, along with Keeper Stephen Cornfoot, Beaters Michael Corner and Clive Lucas, and Chasers Orla Quirke, Anthony Goldstein, and Liz Mullane!

Cho and Draco meet at the center of the field for the pre-game instructions, and with matching looks of dislike, shook hands very quickly. Madam Hooch gave them the usual drivel about playing fairly, and then proceeded to release the balls.

The hour of action that followed would not be a candidate for a Quidditch instructional video, if any such thing existed. The Ravenclaw Chasers spent most of the game trying to avoid being

fouled by their Slytherin counterparts, who were less concerned with scoring points than with ramming into the Ravenclaws. Crabbe and Goyle focused their efforts on Cho, sending bludger after bludger her way, and completely ignoring everyone else. Madam Hooch was positively choleric by the time the first time out was called, thirty minutes in. The score at that point was 90-20 Ravenclaw, and all but one of their goals had been on penalty shots. None of the Ravenclaw Chasers were seriously hurt yet, but they would all be feeling the pain once the adrenaline wore off.

Cho was exhausted from dodging bludgers (none had hit her full on), and Malfoy was taunting her from afar during the timeout. Thus far the snitch hadn't made an appearance, which was just as well for Cho since she didn't have a chance to look for it. She told Michael and Clive to stop thinking about helping the Chasers, and to take out Crabbe and Goyle if they could.

The final half of the game featured matching injuries, as Slytherin Sean Touchet broke Orla Quirke's right leg after he rammed into her at just the right angle, while five minutes later Michael Corner stroked a perfect bludger shot that hit Draco full in the face, knocking him straight off his broom and on to the ground in an unconscious heap. Even without any Seeker competition, though, it took Cho another fifteen minutes to find the Snitch and get it. Draco woke up in the Hospital Wing an hour later to find that his side had lost 310-40. If he had had any teeth left in front, he might have bitched out his Chasers, who only scored four goals.....on luck it seemed to most of the spectators. He spent the night in the Hospital Wing yet again regrowing his teeth, a set of teeth that was only two months old (since Harry had knocked the first set out on the platform). Madam Pomfrey made noises over him that she usually did to Harry, who had not made a Hospital Wing appearance yet this year. Orla Quirke's leg was quickly healed by Madam Pomfrey, and sent on her way back to her dorm.

At 10 pm, after a lot of celebrating in Ravenclaw Tower, Harry and Luna disappeared into their trunks and met in the one belonging to the twins. From there they entered Harry's old room at WWW, where Peter Tyson and Bill Weasley were waiting for them.

"Thank you for coming guys, there is a delicate matter that I need your help with, and I can only trust you two do it right."

"That's quite an opening, what do you need us to do Harry?"

"Bill, I've told this to Peter and Luna, and to my knowledge the only other person who knows about it is Bellatrix Lestrange.....on the night of the DOM, after Lestrange killed Sirius, I hit her with the Cruciatus Curse."

Bill was not as surprised at this as he should have been, but it still shook him a bit. Then, after a second of pause he thought better.....if someone he loved was murdered in front of his eyes and the killer was right there.....he might be tempted to do it too. He wondered for another second why Harry was bringing this up now, then he thought of the trial that was to begin in less than 36 hours. Harry watched all of this unfold on Bill's face, as he got to know his friend/mentor better he was able to read him quite well.

"You're worried about this coming out during Lucius Malfoy's trial aren't you?"

"I'm not worried about it so much as I'm certain of it. That's why I wanted you guys here.....Luna and I want you to Obliviate that information from our minds."

"My God.....You're serious aren't you?"

"Deadly serious Bill, and I mean deadly.....if it comes out during the trial that I used an Unforgivable I'll probably be killed right there in the courtroom. Lucius will go free and the entire light side will shudder in its very foundation.....all because a fifteen year old kid reacted badly to his godfather being murdered in front of him. I can't have that....I won't have that. If I'm Obliviated, then if they ask me the question, my denial will be genuine, I won't remember doing it, even if I'm put under Veritaserum. I don't know if Malfoy and his people saw it or are aware of it, but I can't take that chance."

"He's right Bill, Malfoy's solicitor is Stephen Saunders, and he's very thorough. He might throw it out there even if he doesn't know for sure,

just to see what Harry's reaction is. I don't know yet if all the witnesses are going to be put under Veritaserum or not, but like Harry said, we can't take that chance."

"What about Dumbledore? Does he know about any of this?"

"I don't think so, I'm sure he would have mentioned it by now if he had. I was not proficient in Occlumency before this summer, but I could tell when my mind was invaded, and he didn't try until that night in my living room."

"Why am I here Harry? Peter could have done this just as easily on his own."

"Because I need you to know Bill, I need someone there in my life to make sure that I don't try something like that again. Ron is my best mate, but he isn't mentally strong enough to keep this from Dumbledore if Dumbledore really wanted it; besides, he has to testify at trial, as does Luna.....Fred and George are my brothers, and they treat me as one too, but I tend to think they would have encouraged me to do what I did, not discouraged me. You Bill, you're the one I look up to the most, the one I respect the most. I need you to know."

Bill was genuinely moved by this, the only one of his brothers who had ever said anything remotely like it to him was Charlie, who was his closest sibling not only in age but in friendship. He had often thought of Harry's line in the trunk the night of the first DA meeting 'no brother, I'm not worried about you at all'. This was some kid in front of him here. This was the position that Sirius Black had held for two years, and the one that Remus Lupin wanted, but wouldn't likely get: father figure.

"Thank you Harry.....of course I'll do whatever I can to help you two. Luna, are you sure about this too?"

"Yes Bill, Harry and I have been discussing it ever since we learned there would be a trial, and that we would have to testify in it. There's no other way really, is there?"

Peter and Bill agreed that there wasn't another way, at least not one that involved as little risk as this. Neither one of them was an licensed Ministry Obliviator, but this was relatively simple. Luna in particular would be easy to Oblivate, since she only had a memory of being told of the incident. The reason for their visit here had to be erased as well. After asking her to push the said memories to the front of her mind (Harry had been teaching her basic Occlumency, and she had read his books), Peter used the charm on her first, and they waited a couple of minutes as she sat there and blinked. Peter asked her an easy question first:

"Luna, have you ever performed an Unforgivable Curse?"

"No Peter I haven't."

"To your knowledge, have any of your friends used any?"

"No, of course they haven't. Why are you asking me this?"

With a nod from Harry, Peter proceeded to Oblivate the test as well, he then escorted Luna into the other room. Bill looked at Harry and signaled him to get ready. Bill had a lot of experience Obliviating stray muggles while in Egypt, and this should be easier, given that Harry would have the memories up front in his mind. He waited for his friend to gather himself mentally, Harry closed his eyes and seemed to go into a trance. While his eyes were closed he gave a nod to Bill, and the spell was performed. Bill repeated Peter's questions and Harry passed the test as well. After Bill erased the test from Harry's memory, they talked about trial strategy for a little while until it was time for Harry and Luna to return to Hogwarts. After they disappeared into the twins' trunk, Bill turned to Peter:

"I hope we did the right thing Peter, I have a bad feeling about this."

"We had to Bill, the Crucio is going to come out sooner or later, better that he can deny it with a straight face. I'm sure he's done enough spells in the last four months that Priori Incantatem would be a useless gesture as well."

"We just can't let this be a continual option for him, he thought of it once, there's nothing that says he can't think of it again."

"That's why he told you Bill, so that you can be a check on him. Relax buddy, we did what was best for Harry in the short and long term. We know he won't make a habit of this, he's not like that."

Bill nodded, and they left the shop together to get a late bite to eat.

Monday, November 4, 1996

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

8:00 am

Voldemort surveyed the group of young men in front of him, and smiled inwardly. He didn't show his contentment though, in front of the new recruits. He only let that face show to Pettigrew, Snape, and Bella. Today was the day that he regained the initiative. He addressed Marcus Flint, the leader of the group.

"Now Flint, are you ready? Do you remember the plan?"

"Yes my Master, we will make you proud."

"I have no doubt of that Flint.....do you have the Polyjuice Potion ready? Do you have your port keys?" The ten assembled young men all patted the muggle style canteens that were attached to their belts, and showed off their necklaces, which doubled as their tickets out of danger.

"Now listen to me closely Flint, whatever happens, your number one priority is to kill Lucius Malfoy, preferably before he can spill too much information about us. I don't mind if he tells them some things, but not everything. He'll be the last to testify probably, I want Potter, Bones and the rest to give their statements, it will be instructive to hear what they have to say. Just keep the Aurors distracted long enough to call for reinforcements, which will give the rest of us time to do our business."

"Yes my Master.....may I ask what to do about Potter, Fudge, or Dumbledore? Pettigrew said that it was your decision and that I should ask you about it."

"Fudge I want you to leave alone, completely, do not fire a curse in his direction.....trust me, he does not have the guts to fire one at you. Dumbledore.....well just don't kill him, anything else you can do, and still get away safely, that's up to you. Potter? Defend yourself from him to be sure.....but only kill him if you have a sure shot, if you have any doubt don't try it. Leave his friends alone, they'll likely take their cues from him. Do not fail me Flint, do not make me regret taking you on."

"I won't my Master, today will be our day to shine."

"Yes." Voldemort showered him with his most evil smile, and was happy with the effect it had. Flint wasn't the smartest of the new Death Eaters, but the former Slytherin Quidditch star was young man of action, and that was what was needed today. This was going to be a good day.

## Ministry of Magic

9:00 am

Harry and friends (along with Hermione, who none of them still would speak with unless absolutely necessary) approached the main courtroom with some degree of nervousness. Harry had told all of them chapter and verse of his own experience in this same room, and the room held an air of intimidation about it. They entered the room, followed by Professor Sprout, their designated escort for the morning (Hagrid would take over during the afternoon, as substitutes were teaching the absent Professors' classes). After finding seats toward the front, Harry looked around the room at the various other spectators. The full Wizengamot was there already, with Dumbledore occupying the central position, as befits the Head of the body. Harry also noticed Peter Tyson there, and went over to say hello to him. He recalled meeting Tyson two nights previous, but not the express reason why. Peter told him of an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot held that morning, and it was rumored that they had

passed a law which allowed the Ministry to compel criminal defendants to take Veritaserum, whether they wanted to or not. Harry was personally very glad that this was a new law, he shuddered at the idea of Fudge having that to hang over his head last summer during his own trial.

Soon after, Fudge entered the room, followed closely by Amos Diggory (it was rumored that he had been chosen as the new Senior Undersecretary) and Percy Weasley. Percy glanced at his brother and sister for a moment, but otherwise studiously ignored them, while Fudge walked over to Harry to shake his hand and say hello.

"Hello there Harry, ready for the big day?"

"Yes sir I am, I know it's a day that we've all been looking forward to for a long time."

"Indeed, now remember Harry, you won't be on trial today.....so just relax when you are up there, and tell the truth. If you do that, everything will work out as it should."

"Yes sir, thank you for the advice.....good luck." Harry found it difficult to believe that he was getting courtroom advice from a man who had tried to get his wand snapped in this very room just 15 months before, but he realized that politics is politics, and thus was often times beyond logic.

Fudge smiled at Harry and went up to his place, and the rest of the room (Many of whom had been thunderstruck at the friendly exchange between Fudge and Harry. They had heard about, or listened to, the press conference, but this was up close and personal) went back to their own conversations. Hermione looked at Harry with a faint sense of revulsion, until Ginny stopped it in its tracks.

"Mind your own business traitor, Harry did what he had to do to get Sirius pardoned, so we don't want to hear about it."

"I wish you would stop calling me that Ginny, when are you going to let all that stuff go?"

However Ginny was done talking to Hermione, and proceeded to ignore her, talking to Neville on her left. A frustrated Hermione then turned to Professor Sprout for conversation until Fudge banged his gavel.

“All right people, let us get this underway. Bring in the defendant!” The Aurors stationed at the inner door opened it, and a noticeably thin and haggard Lucius Malfoy was brought out to the center chair. To those who were accustomed to seeing a confident, even arrogant, Malfoy in his fine robes this was a wake up call. Clearly four months spent in the company of the Dementors at Azkaban had not done wonders for him. The fine robes were still there, but the gaunt look on his face told everyone that he had been a guest in Azkaban. He was placed in the chair, and chains wrapped themselves around him. Narcissa and Draco were in the front row, giving him moral support, Draco having been given permission to leave the castle the day before (even Harry couldn’t fault Dumbledore for that bit of mercy, this might be the last time he ever saw his father).

“This trial will now commence, in the matter of the Ministry of Magic versus Lucius Malfoy. I am Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, and I will be presiding. Assisting me will be Senior Undersecretary Amos Diggory (so the rumors were true) and Senior Assistant to the Minister Percival Weasley. Madam Amelia Bones will represent the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Madam Bones, please read the charges.” Bones stood up and addressed the Wizengamot members:

“Ladies and Gentleman of the Wizengamot, the defendant is charged with the following: Murder, conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, torture of muggles, the use of Unforgivable Curses, and the use of Dark Magic. There are, of course, multiple counts of each of these charges, and the Ministry will prove all of them.”

“Does the defendant wish to enter a plea at this time?”

“I am not guilty.” This was said in a hollow voice, without the customary sneer. Stephen Saunders, Malfoy’s advocate, was present in the courtroom as well. Peter had informed Harry and Luna that Saunders wasn’t Dark, he just liked taking impossible cases that got

a lot of attention. He was a professional mouthpiece, who would argue the side that paid him.....the irony being that he and Peter, despite being competitors for the same business (remember, there are only twenty thousand magical folk in all of Britain, and very few solicitors), got along rather well, and often referred each other cases.

“Madam Bones, you may call your first witness.”

“The Ministry calls Harry Potter to the witness chair.”

Harry figured he would be first, but it was still a start to hear his name called so quickly. He walked up to the witness chair that was placed right in front of Fudge’s podium, to the left of the jury/Wizengamot. Lucius was just a few meters away from this position, and one could almost feel the hate radiating from him as he saw Harry. Lucius was finally coming to life as he saw his son’s nemesis, not mention the loathing stares coming from Narcissa and Draco (baring his new set of teeth).

“Mr. Potter, will you take a Wizard’s Oath to tell the truth?”

“Yes ma’am, I swear such an Oath.”

“Good, please state your full name, age, and place of residence for the record.”

“Harry James Potter, I’m sixteen years old, and I reside in Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts.”

“And you are an emancipated minor, with full adult privileges and responsibilities are you not?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“What is your relationship, if any, to the defendant?”

“Blood enemy would be the best way to put it I suppose Madam Bones.” The gallery tittered, as Bones suppressed a smile.

"Can you tell us how many times you have met the defendant in the past?" Harry thought for a moment, and did some counting.

"To my knowledge Madam Bones it would be four times. The first was in Flourish and Blotts, in August of 1992; the second was in Headmaster Dumbledore's office in June of 1993, that's when he tried to attack me by the way; the third was in a graveyard whose location I don't know, after Cedric Diggory and I were kidnapped by portkey at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament two years ago (that caused a stir in the crowd, which Fudge allowed, there was to be no American style 'one more outburst and I'm going to clear this room' nonsense), that's when Voldemort was reborn, this would be June 1995; the fourth and final time was at the Department of Mysteries in June of this year, which was where he was captured. There have been other times I've been in his presence I'm sure, at Quidditch matches and at Platform 9 ¾, but we never spoke on those occasions."

Stephen Saunders stood up at this point and addressed the court.

"Ladies and Gentleman, at this time we would request that Mr. Potter be given Veritaserum, as he has already admitted to being a 'blood enemy', I believe he called it, of Mr. Malfoy. Since his testimony, and that of his friends, is the main linchpin of the Ministry's case, it would seem particularly relevant to ensure that his testimony is one hundred percent true." Fudge eyed Harry a bit nervously, but saw the logic in it.

"Mr. Potter, do you have any objection?" Before Harry could say anything, Peter Tyson stood up from his seat in the gallery.

"May it please the court, my name is Peter Tyson and I am Mr. Potter's solicitor. Mr. Potter has no objections in principle to being administered Veritaserum, as long as Madam Bones and Mr. Saunders are instructed that their questions are to pertain only to the events in question. In other words, we object to any fishing expeditions on either of their parts into Mr. Potter's personal life, or past history at Hogwarts." With that last sentence he stared pointedly at his friend Saunders, who smiled at the inference.

"The Ministry has no objections to those conditions."

“Neither does the defense.”

“Very well, Mr. Potter will be given Veritaserum now. Mr. Tyson, you may stand by to deliver a Silencing Charm on Mr. Potter if you deem the question not relevant, and we can argue about it then. Proceed.” A man in plain black robes approached Harry with a small vial, which he motioned for him to swallow. Harry did so, but didn’t feel anything different. Fudge looked at him and pondered for a moment.

“Mr. Potter, your aunt and uncle on your mother’s side, do you love them or hate them?” Harry answered instantly:

“I hate them.”

The courtroom laughed at that, and Harry blushed a little bit.

“Good, the serum seems to have taken effect. Madam Bones, please proceed.”

“Thank you Minister.....Mr. Potter, you mentioned that the defendant tried to attack you in Headmaster Dumbledore’s office, could you elaborate?”

Harry gave a brief history of the Chamber of Secrets incident, which few in the room had heard the full details of (Ginny was hiding her head in her hands).

“Mr. Malfoy was rather upset that I tricked him into freeing his House Elf, and he drew his wand and started to speak a spell. He got as far as “Ahh” before Dobby said ‘you must not harm Harry Potter’, and banished him about twenty feet. He seemed to lose his taste for attacking me after that, and he left.”

“Where is Dobby now Mr. Potter?”

“Probably at Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes doing some cleaning, he’s now in my employ and helps out there a lot.”

“What about when you say you encountered the defendant after the Tri-Wizard Tournament, how do you know it was actually Lucius Malfoy? I believe you have said in the past, in the Quibbler article this past spring, that everyone was wearing hoods except for He Who Must Not Be Named and Peter Pettigrew.”

“That is correct ma’am, those were the only two faces I saw.....but the man in question had Mr. Malfoy’s voice, and Voldemort (everyone shuddered at the name again) addressed him as Lucius. I took that to mean it was Lucius Malfoy.”

“Let the record reflect that Mr. Potter could not indeed identify Mr. Malfoy by his face. For all we know it was someone impersonating the defendant.”

“Thank you Mr. Saunders, the record will reflect the lack of facial identification. Proceed Madam Bones.”

“Since it is not relevant to the charges, and in deference to the Senior Undersecretary, I won’t make you relive the events that happened that night.....except to ask you one question, under Veritaserum: Was it Lord Voldemort that you saw reborn that night?”

“Yes ma’am it was Voldemort that was reborn that night, with the help of my blood and Peter Pettigrew’s hand.”

“Thank you Mr. Potter. Now let us proceed to the last incident with the defendant, at the Department of Mysteries this past June. How did you come to be there in the first place?”

“I was under the impression that my godfather, Sirius Black, was being held hostage there by Voldemort.”

“What gave you that impression?”

“He was planting visions of it in my head.” This caused another stir, and varied murmurings even among the Wizengamot. Bones knew that an explanation was forthcoming, so she plowed ahead in her questioning.

"How was he doing that Mr. Potter?"

"Because of the incident where I got my scar, there is a connection between Voldemort and myself.....kind of a two way floo between our minds I guess I would call it. There's a technique called Occlumency that is supposed to help shut it off, but I was unable to learn it in time."

"Why is that?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore had Severus Snape, former Professor of Potions, attempt to instruct me in it.....and Snape and I have a bad history, as did he with my father and my godfather. As many of you know, Snape is a very intelligent wizard, but his teaching ability is.....shall we say, suspect. I was unable to learn Occlumency under his tutelage, and Voldemort exploited that fact." He turned to look at the Wizengamot. "I'd like you to know that I have since mastered Occlumency, and there have been no such visions since that night. Headmaster Dumbledore will confirm this, he has experienced it firsthand."

"I can confirm that, and as Harry has just said under Veritaserum, he has had no other visions. The connection is not, and will never be, shut.....as long as they both are alive, but Harry is managing it."

"Thank you Professor Dumbledore. Mr. Potter, who accompanied you to the Department of Mysteries?"

"Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, and Hermione Granger. I begged all five of them not to come I might add, but they wouldn't let me go alone."

"How did you get to the Ministry? It is our understanding that the Hogwarts floo system was shut off during Delores Umbridge's tenure as Headmistress."

"We used the Thestrals that pull the Hogwarts carriages. You have to have witnessed someone dying in order to see them, they're invisible

otherwise you know, and Luna and I have. We guided the others onto their Thestrals, and we flew here.”

“How and where did you come into contact with the defendant?”

“We were in the room that held all of the various Prophecies, that was the room from the visions. It seems that there was one made that involved Voldemort and myself, which is why Voldemort was trying to lure me there in the first place. When I took the bait, somehow he knew, and sent Lucius Malfoy and eleven other Death Eaters to trap me and force me to give them the Prophecy.....apparently the only person who can handle one of the orbs once its placed on the shelf is one who the Prophecy deals with. Voldemort was reluctant to show himself there, so he had to trick me into going there myself.....which he did, I’m ashamed to say. The defendant confronted me and demanded that I give him the orb, and I refused. There was an argument between Lucius and Bellatrix Lestrange, she wanted to attack and he was concerned about the Prophecy being destroyed in the battle. I had no idea at the time why the Prophecy was so important, but Lucius made it clear what it was about, though no one there knew the details. While they were arguing I signaled for my people to attack, and we started the battle. I don’t remember how long the battle actually lasted, but it was quite awhile. I would say that we fought them to a draw in truth, only Luna and I weren’t injured in the fight, but we held them off until Dumbledore and his people got there.” Bones kept to her plan and decided not to bring up the death of Sirius Black, the story of which was now well known anyway thanks to Fudge’s pardon and the accompanying Quibbler article that Harry contributed to heavily.

“Did you observe the defendant using any Dark Magic during the battle?”

“After the battle started ma’am, I lost track of who was who in the Death Eaters, as most of them were still wearing their masks. There were many Avada Kedavras called, but I couldn’t tell you who said them.....it was pure chaos most of the time, and I was concentrating more on staying alive.”

“Thank you Mr. Potter, I have no further questions.”

Stephen Saunders stood up and approached Harry, with a friendly smile on his face.

"Hello Mr. Potter, I know this has been rather stressful for you thus far, but I only have few questions for you. First off, how familiar are you with the Unforgivable Curses?"

"I'm not sure I follow you Mr. Saunders, in what way?"

"Have you ever had any performed on you?"

"Yes sir, all three of them have been used on me."

"Please elaborate Mr. Potter."

"Well Avada Kedavra.....everyone knows when that happened." For emphasis he pulled his hair away from his scar. "Cruciatus, Voldemort held me under that a couple of times the night he was reborn; I was put under Imperious multiple times by Barty Crouch Jr., who we all thought was Mad Eye Moody, during Defense class. He was trying to teach us to throw it off, which I did learn to do. Voldemort also tried to use it on me, but I was able to throw it off before he could make me do anything while under it."

The members of the Wizengamot and the gallery were confused by these questions, as they only appeared to make Harry a more sympathetic witness, but to Dumbledore and Peter Tyson in particular, it was clear Saunders was going somewhere with this. Dumbledore knew this was heading somewhere terrible, and closed his eyes while waiting for it. Peter thought to object to this line of questioning as irrelevant, but he knew that while he would be on solid legal ground, Harry would never survive the backlash he would get for refusing to answer.

"Thank you Mr. Potter, those are quite some experiences you've had. It would be safe to say, based on those experiences, that you know how to use those particular curses yourself?"

"I know the incantations, and I would imagine that I have enough magical power now to use them."

"Have you ever used an Unforgivable Curse Mr. Potter?"

Tyson leaned forward in his seat, this would be the test of Bill's Obliviation technique.

"No Mr. Saunders I have not."

Saunders did not look at all startled by this information, though Narcissa Malfoy certainly did, emitting a gasp that caused much of the courtroom to stare at her.

Saunders knew that there was no point in continuing this line of questioning, and mentally cursed Narcissa for giving him reason to bring it up. She had told him of Potter's casting of Cruciatus on her sister, and though he was as dubious as anyone would be that the 'Boy Who Lived' would cast an Unforgivable, he figured that since Potter would be under Veritaserum and it couldn't hurt too much to ask.....and might well turn the tide in what was surely now a loser of a trial. He briefly thought of asking Harry why he thought he hadn't been punished for illegal entry into the Ministry, but dismissed it. He knew it wouldn't do his client any good, and might engender bad feelings toward himself from the Harry lovers out there.

"The defense has no further questions for Mr. Potter, and we thank him for his time."

Harry nodded at Saunders and walked back to his seat, wondering what that had all been about.....and why were there looks of relief on the faces of Dumbledore and Peter? Madam Bones then proceeded to call Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Hermione in succession to the witness chair. Their accounts, which were not given under Veritaserum, bore out what Harry said in his testimony.....though the fighting details were different of course. The quintet had discussed among themselves what happened that night many times, though not necessarily with an eye toward testifying en masse at a trial about it. They had all heard Dumbledore tell them that there likely wouldn't be a trial at all, so it had come as a relative shock when it was

announced. Hermione too had believed that, and before the schism had fully erupted between her and the group, she had talked a few times about it with Ron and Ginny; so her version of the events matched up pretty well with theirs.

After Hermione left the witness chair, Fudge announced a lunch break of ninety minutes (it was now 11:30 am). Harry approached Hermione and Professor Sprout, who both seemed a bit lost as to where to go.

"We've made arrangements to eat lunch in Mr. Weasley's office, if you two would like to join us."

"Thank you Harry, that's would be very nice. Hermione?"

She nodded, and followed the others as Ron and Ginny led them to their father's office. Arthur wasn't there at the moment, but had left word with Perkins (the Warlock who assisted him) that his kids and their friends would be there today.

"Dobby, Winky!" The elves popped in and began setting up the food (fish and chips, with Coke, and cherry pie for dessert). Hermione looked outraged, with Sprout there she wasn't fearful of being attacked.

"They work for you Harry?"

"Notice the clothes 'Oh Bossy One', they are well paid and taken care of for their efforts, aren't you guys?"

"Oh yes we are, Harry and his friends are the best employers we could ask for. Don't interfere Miss Hermione, we knows you means well, but we are very happy with Harry."

Hermione, to her credit, did then notice the clothes on both Dobby and Winky.....and how relaxed and familiar they acted with the quintet. She had forgotten that the elves had been there that night in the Dursleys. Hermione quietly apologized for her presumption, which Harry accepted, and paid more attention to her food. They spent their lunchtime discussing the trial so far, and they laughed about their

own nervousness about testifying, even Harry. They wondered if anyone would testify after them, they figured one or more of the Order members would have to be there.....would Dumbledore take the witness chair?

No he would not, as it turned out. Madam Bones' next two witnesses were Kingsley and Tonks, who testified about the aftermath and the mop up. They both identified Lucius as being in a Death Eater's costume, and that the Priori Incantatem of his wand showed multiple Dark and Unforgivable Curses. Bones then followed up by doing an actual Priori Incantatem on Malfoy's wand, after brief testimony from Mr. Ollivander that the wand in question was Lucius Malfoy's. The number of Dark and Unforgivable spells that spilled out of it (it had been confiscated since his arrest) made some of the court members sick to their stomach. Bones had planned to call Snape to the stand to give a firsthand account of Malfoy's actions during the first Voldemort war, but now she decided to skip that testimony and strike while the iron was hot.....now was the time to end this.

Meanwhile Marcus Flint and his seven person unit flooded into Magdalena Edgecombe's office, a floo that was conveniently left activated and unattended. Flint and his unit were all relatively new recruits, taken from recent Slytherin graduates and personally selected by Bellatrix on recommendation by Draco, who of course knew them best. They were to wait in the office until Edgecombe came in to tell them that Lucius Malfoy had started to testify, then the plan would begin and they would start cursing.

"The Ministry now calls for Lucius Malfoy to give his testimony. Earlier this morning, by a 32-8 vote, the Wizengamot approved the forced use of Veritaserum on criminal defendants charged with capital crimes. Given the long history of accused Death Eaters who have claimed to be under the Imperious Curse, this was deemed to be essential, particularly with the renewal of the conflict with Voldemort. Therefore, Lucius Malfoy will now be administered Veritaserum, so as to receive a truthful account of his actions."

The same man who had given Veritaserum to Harry, approached Lucius, who did not seem terribly eager to take the vial's contents into his mouth. It was only after employing a simple trick, pinching

Malfoy's nose and forcing him to open his mouth, that the truth agent was administered. Malfoy, already weakened by the Dementors and a lack of food, had a glazed look wash over his eyes in a way that didn't happen with Harry. In particular it reminded Harry and Dumbledore of the reaction of Barty Crouch Jr. Narcissa and Draco looked fearful, and surreptitiously began looking toward the exit, they knew what was about to happen. They saw Magdalena Edgecombe, already sitting in the last row next to the door, slip out right before Bones addressed Lucius.

"Please state your name, age, and place of residence for the record."

"Lucius Titus Malfoy, age 41, Malfoy Manor in East Cornwall."

Bones decided then and there to go for the jugular in the first question.

"Thank you.....Mr. Malfoy, are you a Death Eater?"

"Yes I am."

There is was, the first public admission by a Malfoy in regards to being a Voldemort supporter. The room buzzed, and even the members of the Wizengamot who were either open sympathizers or in the closet sympathizers knew that this trial was over.

"How long have you been a Death Eater?"

"Since my seventeenth birthday, I was inducted by my father."

"There are ten other men at Azkaban right now that were captured with you at the Department of Mysteries and are awaiting trial for crimes similar to yours: Walden Macnair, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rastaban Lestrange, Augustus Rookwood, William Avery, Anton Dolohov, Frederick Nott, Terrence Mulciber, Vincent Crabbe, and Stephen Jugson, are they Death Eaters as well?"

"Yes they are."

"During his testimony Mr. Potter said that twelve Death Eaters were present that night, who was the twelfth?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange, wife of Rodolphus."

"A member of your family is she not?"

"She is my wife's sister."

"How did she escape?"

"I don't know, I assume Lord Voldemort got her out somehow."

"Where is she now?"

"With our Lord, I imagine."

"Where is Voldemort hiding?"

Lucius never got a chance to answer that question, while his mouth was opening to do so, a hooded figure burst into the room and started throwing curses right and left.....he was followed by six more just like him. The leader whipped his hood off and there was a collective gasp by those who weren't hiding yet: it was Voldemort. While his henchmen took aim at the Aurors to hold them off, Voldemort strode quickly up to a still chained Lucius Malfoy and hit him with Avada Kedavra at point blank range. Malfoy slumped slightly, as his chains wouldn't let him fall over, and his chin rested on his sternum.....he was dead.

Harry and his friends dropped down as soon as the first curse was fired from 'Voldemort' (the gallery was seated in church like pews). Harry knew right from the first moment that this wasn't Voldemort, his scar was telling him nothing, and he felt that he should be able to feel him now. He peeked over the pew top and saw that 'Voldemort's' men were putting up advanced shields as their boss was picking off Aurors right and left. Most of the Wizengamot was hiding, as many of them were not known for their defense ability (only one of them was a former Auror). Dumbledore appeared to be erecting barriers as well in front of the court members, though he kept half an eye on where

Harry was and what he was doing. Harry himself quickly took inventory of what was happening, and looked at his friends.

"OK, here's what we're going to do: Ginny, Hermione, you stay here and protect Hagrid (who had replaced Professor Sprout after the lunch break). Ron, Neville, Luna.....diamond formation, start casting Stupefy as soon as you get to your feet."

"Wait a minute, why do I have to stay behind?"

"Because someone has to Ginny, and you're better at defense than these two. If it goes south for us, put up the best shields you can and wait for the Aurors." He pointed at Hermione and Hagrid when he said this. Hagrid was so large that the pew didn't entirely hide him, but the attackers weren't concentrating on the gallery, as none of them were firing spells on them. Hagrid had his own wand now, but was not very good with it, a lifetime without using much magic (other than his umbrella) was hard to change for him. Hermione didn't argue with Harry about staying behind, one look at his facial expression dissuaded any idea of that.

The boys and Luna stood up with wands drawn. Harry was in front, Ron on the left, Neville on the right, Luna in the back in the diamond formation that they had been practicing in Dungeon Seven on their own. They started firing Stupefy at the attackers, whose shields were starting to weaken as more people joined in the defense. There were still no Aurors arriving, the trapped crowd inside didn't know that there were three other Death Eaters outside killing as many Aurors as they could.

While Flint and his people were causing mass chaos in the Ministry, Voldemort (along with Bella and Pettigrew and many other Death Eaters) took Edgecombe made portkeys directly into the warden's office at Azkaban. There they met Warden Matthew Markinson, whom Bella promptly killed before he could raise the alarm. Pettigrew quickly went through Markinson's records and found the locations of the prisoners they had come to grab, he went to the cabinet and grabbed the keys necessary to open the cells, as all cell doors in Azkaban are charmed against Alohomora. This was not to be a mass breakout, they were merely there to retrieve their captured

colleagues.....Voldemort wanted no large scale pitched battle with the Dementors, whom he had given up trying to recruit for the time being, he just wanted his ten followers back before they could spill their guts at trial. The security setup and general layout of Azkaban had changed wholesale since the last breakout in January, otherwise they could have gone about it in the same manner as before. The twenty member Death Eater contingent (not counting Bella, Peter, and Voldemort) received their assignments and spread out to free their compatriots.....except that the remaining Dementors were not caught as off guard as Voldemort had hoped. A group of them, alerted by the mass portkeying of Voldemort's troops, appeared at the end of the hallway near the Warden's office.

Bella and Peter immediately stood in front of their Master and launched their Patronuses, a hawk for Bella and a cat for Peter, at the advancing Dementors. Eight other Death Eaters began marching toward the Dementors and fired their own spells, which combined with the first two (and far more powerful) spells, began driving the Dementors backwards. The other ten took the opportunity presented and quickly disappeared down the corridors to complete their assignments. Goyle led his squad of five down the East Wing, and came upon the cells belonging to Dolohov and Jugson. They used the stolen keys and got their cohorts out into the hall, where they were given small vials of Pepper-Up Potion to animate them enough function in the short-term. They were also given spare wands, and the men moved on to the next row of cells, where Crabbe, Mulciber, and Nott were housed. They repeated the process and were about to head back to the warden's office when they came upon another group of Dementors, thus far no Aurors had been spotted. The healthy Death Eaters fired their own Patronuses at the Dementors, and went a different way back to the office. Goyle instructed the erstwhile prisoners to blast chunks out of the ceiling, which they did.....causing an avalanche of sorts that blocked the way for the Dementors.....and unfortunately for themselves as well. Goyle took out a mirror and tapped it with his wand:

“Master, are you there?”

“What is it Goyle? Have you completed your mission?”

"Yes sir, we have all five of our colleagues in tow, but we're blocked by a large group of Dementors and we had to destroy the only way out to keep them off of us. May we have permission to use the portkeys and return to Headquarters?"

"Go ahead Goyle, good work. We'll see you back at Headquarters."

"Thank you Master." Goyle tapped the mirror again and Voldemort's face was gone. He turned to his crew, who took out their portkeys and motioned for the prisoners to each grab on to one of them. At the word 'activate' they all disappeared, ending up in a field somewhere in Central Scotland, where anyone tracking their portkeys would find absolutely nothing. They Apparated back to Riddle Manor and awaited their Master and the rest of the Death Eaters.

Outside the warden's office, Bella, Peter, and the other Patronus casters were losing strength quickly. Voldemort had joined them a couple of minutes in and even he was getting tired. The Dementors had managed to halve the distance between they and the Death Eaters, but the combined effort of thirteen Patronus spells would not let them get too close to their prey....yet. Finally, Snape (the other squad leader) and his crew came back with all of their assigned prisoners in tow. They had not lost a man, though the Lestrange brothers in particular looked to be on death's door. On Voldemort's command they activated their portkeys and disappeared.

Back at the Ministry, the Aurors were still being held off by the three Death Eaters outside the courtroom doors, while Flint and the ones inside were being driven into a corner by Harry's group and by a few Wizengamot members (including Manuel Zabini and Phillip Greengrass) who were led by Amelia Bones. All of the Aurors stationed inside the courtroom were killed in the first two minutes, with the exceptions of Kingsley and Tonks as the killers seemed to know exactly where they would be located. By this time though, the Death Eaters were no longer firing curses, they were concentrating on their shields. Once they were huddled against the doors Dumbledore suddenly appeared in front of them and used a blast of pure magical energy to temporarily destroy the shields, and Harry, Ron, Neville, and Luna wasted no time and stunned all but one of them, who managed to grab his portkey and get out of there.

Harry walked over to the prone bodies and ripped the masks off, he didn't recognize any of the faces. Moving over to 'Voldemort' he looked at his face, the resemblance was perfect. Dumbledore, who had been checking on Lucius, walked over and laid his hand on Harry's shoulder and looked at the body.

"No Harry, that's not Voldemort.....he would not have been taken down by a simple stunning spell, no matter how powerfully you cast it."

"Polyjuice you figure?"

"Yes it was I'm sure, we'll have to wait a little while to see who they are, I notice they all have hip flasks attached to their belts. That was good work you four, very nice tactics." While Zabini and Greengrass congratulated their young friends, Dumbledore cautiously opened the doors, and found about a dozen bodies littering the hallway, one with a Death Eater mask who was unconscious, and the rest in Auror robes, who appeared to be dead. He listened for any alarms or the sounds of any battles still ongoing, but heard nothing. He walked back inside and addressed the crowd.

"All right everyone, the situation seems to be in control now. The Death Eaters have either been captured or they have escaped. Madam Bones.....(he hesitated)....would you come with me for a moment?" He led Bones outside the doors, where she discovered the bodies of so many of her best people. Counting the ones inside this meant that almost one quarter of her Auror force was dead. The rest were either out on assignment or off-duty. She motioned for a couple of her assistants to come out, and they organized the removal of the bodies, except for that of the unconscious Death Eater. Dumbledore turned to Hagrid, who along with Ginny and Hermione, had come up to look at the bodies.

"Hagrid, I think you should take the children back to school now....." he didn't get any further before he was interrupted by a now approaching Fudge, with an ashen Percy in tow.

"No, no Albus, they will not be going back to school, not yet. I want to wait until the Polyjuice wears off. These four (pointing at Harry, Ron, Luna, and Neville) in particular have the right to know who they were fighting. Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, you may remain as well if you like." The two of them nodded in acknowledgement, and didn't seem at all interested in leaving, nor did Dumbledore or Hagrid do any insisting. Fudge turned to Harry and smiled weakly at him.

"That was some performance Harry, you four probably kept them from escaping. That was some duel."

Harry smiled at the compliment, but something about this was bothering him, something here stunk just a little bit. He looked around the room at the damage that was caused, and took a closer look at the bodies. He immediately spotted the matching necklaces that all of them wore. He stood there thinking for a moment, as everyone watched him.

"That wasn't a duel at all, it was a holding action. You notice that they didn't fire Avada Kedavra at anyone besides the Aurors, they never even fired at me or any of the Wizengamot until we started in on them.....but they killed Lucius quickly enough didn't they? The question is, what....or who, were they delaying for?"

Bones listened to this with a pensive look on her face, she seemed to come to a realization and yelled for Kingsley to come over.

"Take Tonks with you and go to Azkaban.....I have a bad feeling that this was a diversion in order to get the other Death Eaters out of there. Take a portkey right to Warden Markinson's office and find out what you can."

"Yes ma'am." He and Tonks (who had been in the gallery) left, and Bones turned to Harry.

"That's good thinking Harry, I look forward to you becoming an Auror in a couple of years." Harry didn't correct her, even though his interest in becoming an Auror was slight at best.....even if there were now many more openings in the program than this morning. Most of the crowd was led out the door, including Draco and Narcissa, who

didn't say a word in response to some very tepid condolences. They left without a backward glance, not even pausing to sneer at Harry, who turned his back on them as they exited the room.

The trial clearly over, most of the Wizengamot left as well, some with dark looks at Bones, who as head of the DMLE was ultimately responsible for the security of the room. The remaining people, about fifteen in all, waited another 45 minutes for the Polyjuice to wear off. When it did, the face of 'Voldemort' turned into that of Harry's old Quidditch rival, Marcus Flint. The other faces, which were those of random muggles who had been killed to get their hairs, turned into various graduates of Slytherin in their late teens and early twenties. Harry gave Dumbledore an acid look and quietly whispered to him:

"Well, well, well, seven proteges of your boy Snape. Looks like he really did his job well here....for Voldemort." Dumbledore didn't even try to respond as he stood there looking sad at the waste of young lives. Kingsley and Tonks came back, and went up to Bones and Fudge to give their report.

"The ten Death Eaters we were holding in Azkaban are not there any more, and Warden Markinson was killed in his office by Avada Kedavra. I managed to communicate with the Head Dementor, and he made it clear to me that it was Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange who led the breakout. The invaders must have had a portkey into Markinson's office, and the only keys they took were the ones they needed. From incursion to extraction took about ten minutes according to the Dementors."

There wasn't much more left to say, so the Hogwarts people went up to Fudge's office, where they flooded back to Dumbledore's office. He asked the six of them not to say anything to the other students for a couple of hours until dinner time, when he would announce it. The Gryffindors went back to their Common Room, where Hermione went straight up to her room, and the others to their trunks. They met in Ron's trunk, and immediately began mirroring the coordinators in the other Houses, alerting them to an emergency executive council meeting at 9pm in Dungeon Seven.

Dumbledore did tell the rest of the student body what happened, at dinner time like he promised. He personally wished he could have held off sharing the news, but assumed that Harry and friends would spread it around if he didn't. The students were shocked, and many of them looked to the Slytherin table, where an absent Draco usually sat (he was in his room, pretending to be sad and depressed). Looks of suspicion were showered on Crabbe and Nott, whose fathers were now spared their trials. The coordinators now knew what the emergency meeting was about, and they made their own private plans.

That evening at Riddle Manor, it was a time of celebration as the rescued Death Eaters were gorging on their first decent food in months. Voldemort was more than satisfied with the day's events, he had only lost seven very inexperienced Death Eaters.....who would not have been sent on that particular mission in the first place if they had not been expendable. Flint had potential to be sure, but his unit, three of whom had returned, was largely made up of simple soldiers. That type of Death Eater was the easiest to replace, and he had offers out to a couple dozen more younger people who he wanted in the fold. Narcissa came over to him and favored him with a large smile.

"Well Narcissa my dear, you're a widow now. May I offer my sympathies to you in your bereavement?" They both laughed heartily at the private joke, as Narcissa looked at him with admiration.

"Whenever you would like to change my marital status my Lord, you need but say the word."

"I'll keep that in mind Narcissa, I'll keep it in mind."

End Chapter

Author's Note: A great point was raised in one of the reviews about the use of Veritaserum. The reviewer (deadfeather) wondered why the Ministry didn't just use Veritaserum right away on Lucius and company when they captured them. That is a masterpiece of logic that I can only offer two explanations to: That it never occurred to me when I wrote that scene, is one of them. The second one is that JK left the same plot loophole when she wrote the character and situation of Sirius Black (though to me her biggest whopper was how Ginny and Michael Corner dated all that time and Ron was oblivious to it). That's the problem with Veritaserum; logic tells you that it should be used all the time, just to make sure. I myself have now used it in two scenes, with more of it to come in future chapters, since it is the great equalizer, and presents a lot of possibilities. I can say that I probably won't get caught in that kind of logic loophole again.....I hope.

Another quirk you might have noted is that there's a lot of gambling going on between the students, or as I call it 'friendly wagering'. I am not a gambler in real life, but a couple of co-workers and I routinely bet a candy bar or a cup of coffee on things (sports, or whether something stupid at work is going to happen), so that's where it comes from. It's not going to be a plot point or anything, just a quirk.

Monday, November 4, 1996 (continued)

Dungeon Seven, Hogwarts

9:00 pm

The assembled members of the DA's executive council were all abuzz, there was a lot of chatter among them about the day's events, what Dumbledore had told them.....and what Dumbledore surely hadn't told them, said blanks that Harry would fill in. He didn't disappoint them, as he gave them the entire story of what happened that day, including what it felt like to talk under Veritaserum. He ended with his overall impression of what happened.

"Today was the first day of this chapter of the war. Voldemort has been quiet since June.....but that's done now. He attacked two well defended Ministry strongholds and lost only seven, very green,

troops....while retrieving ten of his elite Death Eaters and killing almost two dozen Aurors. This is proof that he's not some screaming madman, but he's either great with tactics or willing to listen to someone who is.....my bet is on the former. The Ministry is not quite in chaos at the moment, but they're substantially weakened, and I don't see Dumbledore as being willing or able to pick up the slack."

"What do you mean willing? Are you saying that he'll let the Ministry fall apart?"

"I'm saying that so far he hasn't done anything to cooperate with them Ernie, other than his photo opportunity lunches with Fudge.....who incidentally didn't even try to hide his contempt toward Dumbledore from me. Dumbledore wants to be the absolute ruler of the light side, and Fudge and I, for vastly different reasons mind you, oppose that. That's why he has me followed everywhere I go, with Listening Charms in all of the places where I frequent. I'm sure he keeps similar tabs on Fudge as well. It wouldn't surprise me to find out that there a clandestine members of the Order that only Dumbledore knows about."

"What does all this change for us? It seems like life here will go on as normal."

"Hopefully that will be the case Hannah, but we have to keep extra eyes peeled on our enemies within the castle. Draco Malfoy is now our number one target; his movements must be monitored at all times. Any of you who have classes with him need to watch him. Blaise, where does the ferret usually do his studying?"

"In his dorm room if possible, though he does have to use the library on occasion. Now that I've moved into the fourth year room we don't have anyone in there, and he's password protected the door so I can't get back in.....trust me, I've tried. He never goes anywhere without at least two or three cronies with him, I've heard he's afraid you're going to snap one of these days and murder him in the hallways."

That got a nice laugh, and the meeting broke up after that. On their way up to the Common Room, the Gryffindors ran into Peeves, who had been pretty subdued this year.

"Well well, a mass of brave little Gryffindor on their way home...who wants a water balloon in the face?" As he reared back to throw one, Harry immobilized him with the wand he'd been hiding behind his back (Ron was carrying the Map). He walked up to Peeves for a quiet chat.

"Peeves, listen up: How would you like a nice supply of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes products? All for you, think of the potential for mayhem." He unfroze Peeves, who now had a greedy expression on his face, and his voice was as serious as Peeves could make it.

"I know this, son of a Marauder that you are, you're not offering this for nothing.....what do you want from me?"

"Target Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott only for the rest of the term.....and after that leave anyone in the DA alone, within reason. Do that and I'll keep you well supplied."

"You have a deal Marauder, when can I expect my pranks?"

"This weekend, after the Quidditch game on Saturday. I'll get the twins to bring in a nice selection for you; they'll personally pick it out." Peeves was cackling with delight, he was going to have so much fun. "Oh yeah, one more condition Peeves.....pictures, my friends and I would love some souvenirs of your work."

Peeves reached out and shook Harry's hand and moved off, still giggling. Neville looked at him with a bemused expression.

"You realize what you just did? Poor Draco isn't going to last the month before he begs to be expelled."

"You think he'll last that long?"

Saturday, November 9, 1996

## The Quidditch Pitch, Hogwarts

Katie paced in the waiting area, and looked her team over: Michael Leach (who had beaten out Jack Sloper for the first team Beater slot for this match) and Seamus Finnegan were swinging their bats around, trying to get loose; Ginny was leaning back with her eyes closed, muttering to herself; Natalie was looking very keyed up, and looked ready to start pacing as well; Harry and Ron were huddled together and talking quietly with serious expressions, on some level Katie didn't want to know what they were talking about either.

Katie herself was torn between wanting to know more about what was going on in the Potter/Dumbledore/Voldemort conflict, as she knew that Harry didn't tell the exec council everything.....and pulling a Hermione and trying to avoid all of it and get through the year. Katie knew that she likely had a professional Quidditch career in her future, with the kind of money that came with it. Risking all of that was not something that made her too comfortable in a lot of ways (Katie did not come from a well to do family). Ultimately the bond she felt she had with Harry and Ron pulled her through and kept her more involved than any other seventh year student, including Cho. The two of them had made a point to keep her involved and remind her that her loyalty was very important to them.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, to the second Quidditch match of the season: Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff! Here comes the team from Hufflepuff! They are led by Captain and Keeper Justin Finch-Fletchley, Seeker Megan Jones, Beaters Wayne Hopkins and Kevin Whitby, and Chasers Zacharias Smith, Elenor Branstone and Laura Madley! Hufflepuff is on a two match winning streak versus Gryffindor and will want to continue it."

"And here are the two time reigning Hogwarts Quidditch Champions from Gryffindor! They're led by Captain and Chaser Katie Bell, along with fellow Chasers Natalie McDonald and Ginny Weasley, Beaters Seamus Finnegan and Michael Leach, Keeper Ron Weasley, and Seeker Harry Potter!" There were a lot of boos from the pro-Malfoy Slytherins, though their standard bearer was nowhere in sight, no doubt he was assuming a Gryffindor victory and didn't want to see his most hated rival triumphant. The pro-Harry Slytherins did their best to

drown out the boos with their cheers, as the one trait they shared with their darker Housemates was a certain level of contempt for all things Hufflepuff (though theirs came mostly from Hufflepuffs lack of DA support).

Katie and Justin met at the center of the pitch and shook hands without prompting, as they were friends from the executive council. Madam Hooch, looking considerably calmer than she had a week ago, gave her pre-game chat and then released the Quaffle, Bludgers, and the Golden Snitch.

Harry had never seen Megan Jones fly before, as she was not a participant in the pickup Quidditch games (which now numbered about two a month on Saturday afternoons). Given that unfamiliarity, he decided to give her a test right away. After about a minute of play the two of them had drifted over to the Gryffindor goals, and without warning Harry shot off toward the other side of the field, just to see if she would follow him. She didn't take the bait, and flew higher in search of the Snitch. Justin pointed at Harry and started laughing.

"Nice try Harry, I told her to be on the lookout for your tricks!"

"Watch out Justin, there's the Quaffle!" The Quaffle of course being on the other side of the field, since they had enough time to tease each other. There hadn't been any jogging that morning (nor was there the usual Saturday brunch cooked by the elves, those were suspended on Quidditch days, since one of them would always be playing), by mutual agreement, though they assumed that Anthony and Blaise went out. Justin was easily Harry's best friend in Hufflepuff, and truth be told, just about the only Hufflepuff sixth year boy that he even liked that much. He respected Ernie Macmillan, but had a hard time feeling warmth for him; Zach Smith was still an enigma, he wasn't hostile to anyone outright, but made no effort to join the DA or get close to anyone who was; Wayne Hopkins and the other sixth year boys weren't in the DA either, and Harry barely knew them except to say hello.

After about ten minutes the flow of the game for Gryffindor became clear: Natalie and Katie handled the offense for the Chasers, while Ginny was the point person on defense. Ginny was practically

ignoring the offense as she marked Zach Smith, who was Hufflepuff's best Chaser. Seamus and Michael kept Megan Jones busy; they had seen how effective Crabbe and Goyle had been against Cho the week before with the same strategy. Ron had held up well against the Hufflepuff Chasers, allowing two goals in the first ten minutes, matching the number that Justin had allowed. The Snitch had yet to make an appearance, and Harry satisfied himself with trying to get Megan to follow him....which wasn't working, as she was barely moving on her broom, her eyes searching for the Snitch.

On the Hufflepuff side, their strategy was somewhat different. The Beaters were leaving Harry alone, apparently deciding it was a waste of time trying to unseat him. The Chasers, led by Zach Smith, were doing a lot of passing back and forth.....and not much shooting, as seemed to be digging in for a long game, and were testing Ron out, this was not the nervous git who they scored goal after goal on last year.

What all the spectators noticed was that it was a remarkably clean game, especially after the carnage last week. Even Zach, who had a reputation as a rough player, was on his best behavior. At the half hour mark the score was only 40-30, with Hufflepuff in the lead. It wasn't so much that the Keepers were playing well, though they were, it was that the Chasers on both sides weren't shooting very well. Katie called a time out, and gathered her team on the ground.

"Ok people, this is getting bad, and it's boring as well. Harry, you've got ten minutes to get the Snitch or you and Ginny are switching places. Beaters stop worrying about Jones and concentrate all your bludgers on Zach Smith, knock him out of the game. Now let's get back up there."

They went back into the air at the whistle, and the new bludger tactic paid dividends almost right away. Zach was hit by three bludgers in the next five minutes (on the left arm, right leg, and sternum), though somehow he stayed on his broom until the fourth one hit at the ten minute mark, right in the small of his back. After that one the pain got to be too much and he slumped forward on his broom, unconscious. Madam Hooch guided him slowly down to the ground. The assembled crowd gave Zach a nice round of applause, in tribute to

his resilience, as Reserve Chaser Ernie Macmillan got his broom and took to the air within a couple of minutes; though not in time to help prevent two quick Gryffindor goals. Hooch got back up there after handing Zach off to Madam Pomphrey, and Katie flew over to her after the second goal, the score was now 50-40 in Gryffindor's favor.

"Madam Hooch, we have a position change: Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are swapping, she'll be Seeker and he'll be a Chaser." Hooch nodded her acknowledgement and the switch was made.

The Gryffindor Chasers immediately went on the attack and scored five quick goals over the next ten minutes, and the lead was now sixty points. Ginny was doing nothing but marking Megan, they were flying so close together that they were practically touching brooms most of the time, as Ginny wanted to give her teammates enough time to pile the score up. Harry was using the speed of his Firebolt (though three years old, it was still the fastest broom on the pitch) to make solo breakaways and he would charge Justin and dare him to try and block him. This was not something that Hufflepuff practices had incorporated, and Justin was beaten almost every time. Pretty soon, the score was 170-50, and Harry was making life miserable for the Hufflepuffs, as Katie and Natalie were able to use all of their energy to play defense; when they got the ball they simply passed it to Harry. At that point, the Hufflepuffs were reduced to keeping two Chasers back in order to defend the other two hoops that Justin couldn't cover.

That kind of slowdown tactic worked for awhile, though it had the benefit to Gryffindor of allowing Katie and Natalie back in the flow of the offense. Ron suddenly had very little to do by his hoops, and had taken to moving up to midfield so he could better watch the action. After four more unanswered goals from Natalie and Katie (210-50), the Snitch was spotted by the Gryffindor hoops. Megan spotted it first and charged after it, Ginny following about ten feet behind her. Ron also sped toward the hoops, ostensibly to get back into proper position (Katie could be heard screaming at him to do so, she didn't want to jeopardize their big lead), but really to try and intersect Megan's path and hopefully slow her down.

Unfortunately for Ron and Ginny, Megan got a good line on the Snitch and closed hard, catching in her left hand just as Harry was

scoring another goal on the other side of the field. She had been paying as close of attention to the overall score as anyone, so she knew that her catch had ended the game, but not won it. Still, the smile on her face was that of satisfaction. Megan too had been at the Quidditch World Cup Final two years ago, and remembered that Viktor Krum had ended the game on his own terms. The final score was Gryffindor 220, and Hufflepuff 200. Once they got to the ground, the two teams shook hands, and Harry took Megan aside.

"That was a nice catch Megan; you showed a lot of talent out there. No wonder you beat out Summersby for the position."

"Thanks Harry, that's very nice of you to say. You moving to Chaser had a lot to do with it I'm sure."

"I don't know about that, the Snitch hasn't been to cooperative the last two games, it hasn't shown up too many times. A fast broom is great, and I'm eternally grateful for my Firebolt, but good timing and instincts are even more important."

"He's right Megan, you did a great job out there, I knew I made the right choice when I took you off the reserve team. I like our chances against Slytherin in the next game, they won't have Harry to terrorize me.....will they?" The three of them laughed, though Harry's was a bit false. That was another thing he had only shared with his closest friends: that the Sorting Hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin.

In the dressing room the Gryffindors had their after action report, and Katie was full of praise for everyone, even Ginny (who had played the worst of the bunch). The next match was against Ravenclaw, scheduled for mid-February, there was plenty of time to get the Chasers into shape.....though the Harry as Chaser experiment had succeeded beyond Katie's wildest dreams. The celebration lasted into the night, and even Hermione loosened up enough not to tattle on the twins bringing mayhem once again into Gryffindor Tower.

Sunday, November 10, 1996

Great Hall, Hogwarts

After the DA meeting, Colin asked Harry if he could talk with him for a minute, alone. Over the last few months Colin had shed his manic-around-Harry persona, and had calmed down considerably. Part of it was his Prefect responsibilities, and part of it was just a natural maturation. Colin was a leader in his year and was acting like it more and more. Harry knew that in the unlikely event that the DA was needed after he graduated (he figured the final battle would be long before that), Colin, Ginny, and Luna would be its leaders.

"What's up Colin?"

"I'm not quite sure how to say this Harry.....you know that Hermione and I have talked a few times recently? You know, after you let the word out that we could."

"Well that's not how I would like to put it, but I get what you're saying.....Go on."

"Well I want to ask her to the Yule Ball, and I wanted to make sure it was ok."

"You don't need my permission, or anyone else's, to ask someone out on a date Colin."

"You know what I mean Harry, I don't want to be ostracized like she has been.....but I like her, she's not the way she was before, she's nicer."

"I can understand where you're coming from, and I for one won't treat you any differently if you and she start dating, or even just go out this once. I won't speak for Neville or the Weasleys mind you, but I can speak for myself and Luna on that score. You're your own man Colin, you should do as you please.....but that said, I appreciate you giving me a heads up about it, I can prepare Ron and Ginny for it."

"Thanks Harry, that's a load off my mind."

"Just remember this though Colin: Hermione is not in the loop for the executive council, not for one second. Keep in mind the parchment you signed: if you tell her things about it, whether she asks you or you

volunteer it, the parchment will make you suffer. I'm not going to say what it will do to you, but it will be harsh."

"I understand, that won't be a problem. My interest in Hermione is purely social anyway. Can I ask you something else? Why do Ginny and Ron hate her so much? You don't seem to hate her, and she screwed you over the most."

"That's not for me to say really Colin, that's something you should ask them. I'm sure you'll get an earful if you do, be careful."

"Fair enough Harry, I'll see you later ok?"

"Take it easy Colin."

Ron and Ginny were the only ones waiting for him as he exited the Great Hall; Luna and the others were heading to the library. Ginny looked quizzically at Harry.

"What was that all about?"

"He wants to ask Hermione to the Yule Ball, and he wanted to make sure we weren't going to roast him over an open fire if she said yes." Ron looked fairly revolted at the thought.

"What did you tell him?"

"Oh grow up Ron, what do you think I told him? It's not like he wanted to ask Pansy or Millicent. He can ask whoever he wants, I'm not about to start interfering in people's personal lives. Remember, you were Hermione's last suitor.....and not too long ago, wasn't it?"

"Okay, okay, no need to fight dirty."

"He also asked me why you two in particular hate her so much. I told him that he should ask you personally for the answer to that one."

"Like it isn't obvious, that wench betrayed us Harry. I'm surprised you don't hate her too."

"Ginny, I don't hate any wizard or witch without a Dark Mark on their arm.....I don't even hate Dumbledore or Percy. Look, you guys weren't there when Bliss and Shepherd talked about how the old bastard was manipulating her by asking her those questions. I'm not saying I forgive her, or even that I like her.....I'm just saying I understand her a bit better. Times change guys, and friendships evolve: at first it was just me and Ron, then the infamous 'Trio', and then there were six of us when Neville, Luna, and you Ginny joined us.....now it's just five, with Susan, Dean, and Blaise knocking on the door." He was stopped by Ginny clearing her throat.

"Well not so fast on Dean there. We're about to break up I think, at least that's the way it looks."

"What's happening? I thought you two were going strong?"

"I don't know really, it's just not working. There haven't been any fireworks, and no one has cheated on the other.....it's just not working."

"I'm sorry Ginny....I mean I know I give Dean a hard time, and his winking about what you two do does get on my nerves, but I don't want you to be hurt."

"Oh he just does that to get a rise out of you Ron, he and I really haven't done much.....and that might be some of the problem from his point of view."

As relieved as Harry and Ron were to hear that part, this line of conversation was making them distinctly uncomfortable. Harry had now grown accustomed to thinking of her like a sister, and was now praying that there wasn't going to be a 'crush redux', whereas Ron did not want to hear anything about his sister's physical happenings, however vaguely told..

"Don't worry Harry, I'm over you, you can relax now."

"Why I don't know what you mean Ginny, I wasn't thinking that."

"Liar.....I know you too well by now, and I don't want to hear it either Ron, I don't want you going after Dean for this." Ron had an innocent look on his face, but wasn't about to deny the intention. "I mean it Ron, as long as our breakup is nice and normal, I don't want you trying to beat him up or hex him. Am I understood, both of you?"

"Hey don't look at me Ginny, the only threat I made to Dean is that I wouldn't protect him from Ron, that's it."

"And I've never threatened him at all.....but if it makes you feel any better, I'll do as you ask, no problem."

Satisfied, Ginny nodded her head and walked off toward the library, where the others were waiting. Harry and Ron looked at each other and shrugged, and moved to follow her.

"Now do you understand why I wouldn't let you two tell Dean and Susan about the trunks just yet?"

"I still say we kick his butt, I'm sure there's something she's not telling us."

"If we do that, we'll be next as she goes Marauder on us.....not worth it if you ask me. I'd have been with you if she hadn't specifically told us not to."

"Good point, we should probably just leave well enough alone." And so they did, and the breakup happened without a hitch that night. Dean, for his part, did not act like a young man ashamed of his actions, as he went through his before bed rituals that night in the room. Knowing that there was a Listening Charm audience as well as Neville and Seamus, Ron called out to his roommate of five years:

"Relax Dean, Ginny told us not to murder you, so you're safe." Ron was smiling when he said this, and Dean let a smile hit his face too.

"Thanks Ron.....I think. I was hoping there would be no hard feelings with you two."

"Not to worry Dean, you treated my little sister right from what she said, so we have nothing to complain about, do we Harry?"

"Nope, nothing has changed Dean, we're cool." Neville and Seamus started clapping, though that stopped when three sets of pillows hit them in the face.

Colin did ask Hermione to the Yule Ball that day (before he could lose his nerve), and to no one's surprise she accepted. That night Harry had once again spread the word that the four of them (him, Ron, Ginny, and Neville) wouldn't hold it against anyone who socialized with her, and more people were taking advantage of it to do so. Colin had been right about her in a sense; this was kind of a 'new and improved' Hermione. She was still devoted to her books, but seemed much calmer about everything else than she was in the previous years. Harry reflected that maybe he and Ron hadn't been so good for her; perhaps their adventures were putting a strain and stress on her that made her so unlikable. He continued to leave her alone, since it seemed to benefit them both.

November 28, 1996

Hogwarts

Noon

Before everyone left for the second Hogsmeade visit of the term, Dumbledore and McGonagall pulled Harry aside to talk with him. He motioned for his friends to wait up for him, as he stared down his teachers.

"Now Harry, there will be Order members all over Hogsmeade today, and while we know you are meeting Remus for lunch, we would prefer no incidents like last time."

"What incidents Headmaster?"

"You know very well I'm referring to you and Severus."

"Well at least you're not calling that moron 'Professor' any longer. If you had bothered to ask anyone who was there, other than Snape, what happened.....you would know that he approached us, not the other way around. He was quite well hidden you should know, and we wouldn't have seen him if he hadn't identified himself. Not to mention that we didn't attack him, we just traded a few insults. Besides, any interaction I have with a private citizen while in Hogsmeade should not be cause for criticism by you."

"Be that as it may, the Order members are there for your protection....."

"No Headmaster, I'm sorry but I don't care to hear any more warnings. I will always be with at least half a dozen of my friends today, and you saw at the Ministry both times how well we fight when it's called upon. I do have something I'd like to show you though." With that, he pulled from his robes a few pictures that Winky had taken back in July: they were of Snape with his wand out and red light emanating from it, right toward Harry.

"They turned out really well didn't they? Now if I see his greasy head or have to listen to that sneering voice even once today, copies of those photos will be in the next editions of The Daily Prophet and The Quibbler. I hate that man, so keep him away from me and my friends.....or else." Dumbledore sighed, as McGonagall tried successfully to keep the smile off her face (though her eyes crinkled). Dumbledore wore a fairly disgusted look as he addressed Harry.

"You really are going down the wrong path Harry; I've heard these kinds of words before."

"You're wrong and you know it, you're just upset that once again I've taken control of a situation that you view as yours by right. I'm not going Dark and you both know, I'm just playing by your own rules and it chafes you to watch me do it at your expense. Here's the thing Headmaster, you get respect by being both moral and logically correct.....I've got the latter, and you're forcing me to forgo the former too many times. Right now you're failing on both counts from me, and those who follow me. Just keep Snape out of my way, or the

consequences will be harsh. Good day to you both, I'll be sure to give Remus your regards."

With that, Harry strode away as quickly as dignity would allow him.....he half expected a hex in the back. None of the Harry/Dumbledore confrontations surprised his friends anymore, and it was quickly forgotten by most of them, except for Harry.

There was an increased vigilance in Hogsmeade this day, as it was worried that Voldemort, if not actually assaulting the village, would at least have a presence there to cause trouble. The entire Auror Command, what was left of it, was mobilized to guard either the Ministry or Hogsmeade. The Hogwarts Professors as well were there, aside from the Heads of House, who were keeping an eye on the youngest two years back in their Common Rooms.

Harry walked with his rather large contingent toward the main drag of Hogsmeade, where some serious Christmas shopping was about to be done by most of them. There only a few days between the catching of the train and Christmas, so a lot of the gift buying had to be done today. Harry had a special gift in mind for some of his friends that would have to be gotten in London.

After a little bit, the boys and girls separated so that they could shop for each other. Harry peeled off in one direction with Ron, Neville, Blaise, Terry, Justin, and Anthony.....except that Anthony had pulled Ginny aside and was nervously talking with her.

"Ginny.....umm.....well I was wondering....." he hesitated, and Ginny smiled at him and decided not to put him through any more agony. Harry had kind of hinted to her that Anthony had been asking questions about her, but was very shy about things like that.

"I'd love to go to the Yule Ball with you Anthony." The look of relief on his face was priceless, and Ginny scolded herself for not having Winky nearby with a camera handy.

"That's great Ginny, that's really great. We're going to have fun, I promise."

"I know we will Anthony, you're a really nice guy and I'm looking forward to it. If it makes you feel any better, if you hadn't asked me by dinner time I would have done it for you."

"I'm going to kill Harry."

"He didn't tell me anything concrete, just that you seemed to be interested in me." They smiled at each other and briefly touched hands, then moved off with their groups to go shopping. He got a lot of ribbing from the lads, and Harry and Ron smilingly told him in great detail what they'd do to him if he hurt her in any way. They were both happy that those two were going to go the Ball together; it kept things kind of in the family so to speak.

The main stop for the boys was Honeydukes, where the seven of them spent more money than they probably should have on sweets, especially Justin and Anthony, who would be in the muggle world for their holidays. By pre-arrangement Remus was standing by in Honeydukes as well, and he and Harry went to the side for a brief talk.

"Remus, sometime during the break I want you to take me to my parents' graves."

"I was wondering when you'd be asking me that, and I've been preparing for it. Dumbledore had had it under Fidelius for a long time, and didn't seem too interested in taking the spell off when I asked him to. He seems to think that the place would be constantly under watch by Voldemort and his people, just waiting for you to show up there during such a holiday. I told him I would be going to Fudge personally, as your emissary, to force him to do it if I had to, and he backed down. That man really is a trial sometimes Harry I tell you."

"But he did take it off? I should have known that bastard would do something like that. You know that Snape taunted me about it when he attacked me? He said it was a place that I wasn't even allowed to visit. Speaking of scum, where is Snape today?"

"You don't want to know Harry; I doubt he's dumb enough to confront you again. Did you show Dumbledore the photos?" Harry's dark look was replaced by a smile and some giggles.

"The look on his face Remus, and McGonagall was fidgeting around, trying not to laugh."

"Good, you know that while McGonagall doesn't like to go against Dumbledore, she's quite sympathetic to you, as are Bliss and Shepherd. I can tell that they don't agree with the old man when he worries about you like he does." Remus wasn't in the know about the true loyalties of Bliss and Shepherd, and Harry adopted a look of mild interest.

"They're nice people; I'll say that about them. And Bliss is right up there with you as far as teaching goes, I'm learning a lot in her class."

"That's good, Dumbledore didn't screw up the hire for once. Now I'd better get back to my rounds. Are we going to see each other around the holidays?"

"Definitely, I'm anticipating an invitation to The Burrow for Christmas Day, though I'll be living in the shop most of the rest of the break. I'll ask Mrs....." he got no further before Remus interrupted him.

"You don't need to do that, she's informed me that I'll be spending the day at The Burrow as well."

"Great, I'm looking forward to it. Our extended family all together again, for the first time since the Day of Comeuppance (aka Mexican standoff night)."

They said their goodbyes, and Harry went back to his friends, while Remus disappeared into the crowd. The rest of the day was fun and uneventful; no sign of Snape anywhere, and Voldemort didn't make an appearance. Two people who did make an appearance were Fred and George, who met the group at The Three Broomsticks for an early dinner and some prank sales. By the time they headed back to the carriages, most of them were dead broke (even Harry had spent all the money he had brought with him), but everyone was happy, and looking forward to the last three weeks before the break.

Sunday December 7, 1996

4:00 pm

## Dungeon Seven, Hogwarts

After the penultimate executive council meeting (there would be one more the night before the Yule Ball), Fred and George kept Harry back, along with Anthony (muggle born Anthony we should say, Justin being sick and not there at the meeting) and Luna. Fred took his trunk out of his pocket and enlarged it to normal size. Once done, he and George climbed into it as the three others looked at each other with hopeful faces. This couldn't be more pranks; the twins had done that at the beginning of the meeting, doing a brisk business that sold even more than they had last weekend. They exited the trunk with what looked to be shrunken bags, after enlarging them they opened them to show a television, CD boom box, and a video cassette recorder. George addressed the three teenagers.

"Thank goodness for shrinking charms, that television alone is really heavy. Now.....Luna, Anthony, I don't know if Harry told you that we've been experimenting with muggle entertainment vehicles, and how to make them work in a magic heavy environment." Anthony's eyes were as wide as Luna's usually were, listening to that professional opening, and he looked at the others.

"Who are these guys and what did they do with Gred and Forge?"

"Funny Anthony, remind us to do some prank experiments on you as your Christmas present; which doesn't even go into you dating our little sister, but we're assuming that Harry and Ron have threatened you sufficiently for all of us.....now where was I? Oh yeah: the problem with using muggle appliances and things like that is that magic seems to interfere with both electricity and batteries. Our dad has tons of batteries in his shed, but he can't get them to do anything, nor will anything happen when he's at work in the Ministry. The problem is that the Burrow and the Ministry themselves are acting as kind of jamming agents.....we've been reading that muggle guy Tom Clancy, so we know about things like that. Well we've been working on this for over three months now, and we've found a

solution.....and a couple of resulting problems. First off, we've figured out how to offset the jamming. Tell them Fred."

"It's a relatively simple spell that mutes the amount of magic around a given spot, a spot that can be up to five square meters. We read about it in one of Harry's advanced books, though from what we remember it's not taught here at Hogwarts, and we actually paid attention in Charms class. The spell acts a kind of damping field, and will last in that spot for about a year before it dissolves, according to the book. Allow me to demonstrate:"

With that, Fred pointed his wand at the boom box and performed a charm on it and the area around it, sweeping his wand in a tightly controlled arc. When he was done he went over and turned on the stereo.....and what do you know, the sounds of Oasis came out of it, and there didn't seem to be any interference. Harry and Anthony both recognized the song Wonderwall coming out of the box, and Luna started humming along as well. Harry looked at his partners with much admiration, and adopted a mock smug look.

"I knew you would do it.....I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! Of all the talents I have, my ability to pick friends and partners is the one I prize the most."

"It's a gift, we agree. Well it took awhile, but we did find the spell, a rather obscure one we might say. We now have quite the working knowledge of your library Harry. Now in addition to selling the appliances themselves, we can sell the knowledge of how to use the charm too, though it would be a one-time thing. We think we've found a way to make knowledge of it use-specific, so that the person we sell it to can't just go blabbing to all their friends and hurt our cash cow."

"Even better, you two really are geniuses. Now you mentioned a couple of problems?"

"Well the problem is with the television and anything else requiring electricity. We can get the anti-jamming charm to work on this as well.....but the thing is, none of the wizarding world, at least in Britain, is wired for electricity, and these things aren't built to run on batteries. Now in America, wizards are much more into muggle

technology, since they live much closer together and they don't seem to have this problem. Now there are two possible solutions to this: number one, modify the appliances themselves to run on batteries.....which is possible, but is quite a bit of work for each individual apparatus; the second option is to use this (he went back into the trunk and retrieved a portable generator). It feeds off of gasoline and will connect with a power cord to whatever appliance you want it to. There is quite the noise problem, but a muting charm will fix that right away."

"What's the other problem?"

"We're going to have to buy this stuff in bulk to make any kind of money on it. We know these things will sell pretty well, especially to the younger set.....but we can't be buying this stuff retail anymore Harry. Harrods by the way is one of the more expensive places to buy these things you know."

"You've met my relatives; you really think I got taken on a lot of London shopping trips growing up? It's just about the only place to get that stuff in London that I've heard of."

"Point taken, anyway what we want to do is go through Gringotts and order this stuff from the manufacturers. No muggle companies in Britain make the good stuff, so we'll have to get it from Japan. Gringotts has a foreign exchange department that will help us with that, for a small fee of course. They have muggle bank connections that will make everything seem nice and muggle like, like we're a small muggle electronics shop trying to get going. We want to bring Peter Tyson to our meeting with them next week, and Bill said that he would make a point to stop in as well. There's no way we can get this up and running for Christmas of course, but come Easter break we'll be ready with a presentation for the masses."

"How much money are we talking about for a startup?"

"Probably around 20,000 galleons for the initial orders, which will be for the televisions, video cassette recorders, compact disc players, the generators, and the various tapes and discs that we would like to sell. Now the business can afford that right now, our profits over the

last three months have been far above what we thought, thanks to the mail orders and what we've been selling when we've been here.....but only just."

"Don't worry about that guys, if it fails then I'll replace the 20,000 galleons from my own account, if it succeeds, I'll of course only take my 1/3.....which I want plowed back into the business anyway for the time being."

"Good, we were hoping you would say that.....it's not that we don't think this will work, but we'd feel better without risking the entire business on this. Now Anthony, this is where you come in, you and all of our other muggle born and raised friends. We need to know what tapes and music discs to stock. Fred and I have as good a working knowledge of the muggle world as any pure-bloods out there, but we didn't grow up in it like you guys did. What we want is a master list of what to order. I mean we know about Oasis obviously, and U2 and the Beatles and all of those big acts.....but we need more than that."

"I can get you a list of what I have at home, plus some recommendations from my muggle friends back in Sheffield. When do you need the list by?"

"By the time you come back from Winter Holiday will be good enough, it will take us that long to get the appliances ordered.....oh yeah, something I've always wanted to ask you muggleborns.....where do your muggle friends think you are right now?"

Anthony laughed at that question, one indeed that he rarely got from his wizarding friends. Harry was smirking too, as he had never bothered to ask that question himself until this summer, when he had queried Peter about it.

"The ones of us who have some kind of paper trail in the muggle world are ghost registered at the Rowling School, a private prep school here in Scotland; right outside Aberdeen if I remember correctly. The Headmaster there is a closet wizard and all of the staff are part of the deception as well. Those few muggle born wizards who choose to go to muggle universities get academic records from there that reflect their academic performance here at Hogwarts. So

that's where my friends think I am, and most of my relatives too. I'm an only child, and my parents are the only ones in my family in on the secret. It beats being thought of a student at a reform school, like someone we might mention."

"Don't start Anthony.....I actually want to get some of your tamer pranks guys, so I can send them to Dudley."

"I didn't know you still wanted any contact with those people Harry, though he seems to be the best of the bunch."

"Call it an experiment. Maybe now that I'm not forced on them, they might be halfway decent people. I'm just keeping in contact with Dudley for now; we've exchanged a couple of letters through Mrs. Figg."

"Are you going to stay at the shop over the Winter Holiday? You're coming to The Burrow for Christmas Day right?"

"Right and right, I got an owl from your mum last week inviting me. I wouldn't miss Christmas at The Burrow."

"Dad says she didn't even bother inviting Percy, I guess Bill told them what happened at your lunch with Fudge, and they're finally starting to harden their hearts against him."

"Well Percy made his choices didn't he? As much as Fudge and I are getting along lately, I just can't imagine trading all of you for him."

Thursday, December 11, 1996

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Breakfast

It was just another normal Thursday morning at breakfast until the mail came halfway through the meal. Harry got two letters in the big rush: one from Mrs. Figg's owl, which had a small package attached to it, and another thin envelope delivered by an unfamiliar owl, which wasn't much bigger than Pig. He opened Mrs. Figg's letter first, to find

out it was from Dudley, delivering his Christmas present (which turned out to be a movie poster book. Harry had to un-shrink it, how Mrs. Figg had shrunk it down was one of life's mysteries) and thanking him for the pranks. He had already used a couple of them to great effect, and wanted to know if he could send Harry some muggle pounds occasionally so that he could reload his supply. Harry chuckled to himself; he had to show this to Anthony, who was considering giving the same gifts to his friends back home.

The second letter was short one, and rocked Harry harder than anything since Sirius' death.

Dear Harry,

I would like to extend you an invitation to join my organization. I've watched you grow up over these last few years and I continue to be impressed by your power, intelligence, and lately.....your cunning and shrewdness. I'm aware of how much you loathe Dumbledore, and barely tolerate Fudge, and I can guarantee you better treatment than you've had at their hands. I'll install you immediately as my second in command, and you'll be treated by my.....our people, with the respect that you clearly deserve.

We have a bond Harry, one that will never be broken. I know the Prophecy says that one of us must kill the other, but I feel we should be able to set that aside to work together. With us joined in partnership, Britain will be ours; those two fools will never be able to stop us. I know how attached you are to your friends, and they would of course be welcome to come with you. Think about this Harry; think about the power you could have if you joined me. I know you'll make the right decision.

Send your answer with one of the school owls, address the envelope to Tom Riddle and it will find me.

Lord Voldemort

Harry got up and walked out of the Hall, trying very hard to walk normally. Ron and Neville looked at his retreating form, and immediately left their seats and followed him (after grabbing his bag,

which he had left behind in his daze). They found him outside the Great Hall, leaning against the wall and vomiting. Ron and Neville stood back for a moment, before Ron gingerly took the letter from Harry's hand, as this clearly was what was bothering him. He read it and silently passed it to Neville.

"Harry, it's going to be fine mate.....don't worry, no one thinks that you would say yes to something like this."

"Ron's right Harry, I mean we knew this might be coming. Didn't Fudge tell you he'd heard it as a rumor?"

"I didn't believe him guys; I just didn't believe it could happen. I swear, I almost had a heart attack when I read it. Does he honestly believe that I'll join him?"

"I don't know mate, it could just be that he's taking a shot in the dark just in case, before he takes the war to you."

"Are you going to show this Dumbledore?"

"I have to, this isn't quite the same thing as a vision, so it's not part of our deal.....but better he hear about this from me than from someone else. I have my free period after lunch, I'll tell him then, after I send an owl to Voldemort telling him in no uncertain terms where to put his offer. I have to do that before I talk to the old man, or else he'll wonder if I'm actually going to do it. I can't have him thinking that he persuaded me to turn it down, he'll never let me live it down if that happens. Not a word to anyone about this until then, except for Ginny and Luna."

"Not a word, I agree that it wouldn't be a good idea to advertise this. C'mon, let's get to Charms, we'll just tell people that Harry was sick to his stomach."

"Which was true." With that, Neville did a quick Scourgify on the dirty wall, and the three of them headed to class.

Before Harry went to Dumbledore's office, he went up to the Owlery and fired off messages to his outside allies (Remus, the twins, Peter,

and Bill), relaying the substance of the offer and of his firm rejection of it.....again with the idea that he wanted his friends and mentors to hear about it from him, rather than from rumor or from Dumbledore.

Dumbledore took the news without much comment, and though it seemed like there was a lot he wanted to say, he managed to bite his tongue. It was clear to Harry that Dumbledore wanted to tell him that he had brought this offer on to himself, with all the infighting he had caused within the Order over the last few months. However, Dumbledore merely accepted Harry's assurances that he had turned Voldemort down flat, and had no intention of changing his mind.

Harry walked out of the ten minute meeting feeling more than a bit unclean, though he could not put his finger on exactly why.....except for a vague impression that Dumbledore hadn't quite believed him when he said he wasn't going to turn Dark.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

8:00 pm

"Hello Snape, how are you this fine evening?" Snape heard those words and wanted to immediately run from the room screaming in panic, but somehow forced a smile on his face. He knew this had to be about Potter, since the letter had gone out the night before.

"I'm good, thank you my Master."

Voldemort took Harry's note from his pocket and pushed it across the table to Snape. It was quite simple to read, as it only had one word in the text:

NEVER

Harry Potter

Snape wanted nothing more than to break out in a song and dance of happiness at that moment, he was dreading Potter actually taking Voldemort up on his offer (he thought it rather unlikely, but stranger

things had happened). He kept himself composed though, and looked at Voldemort with nothing more than a bland expression of curiosity.

"It's ok Snape, you can celebrate later. That is the lad's handwriting?"

"Yes it is Master."

"Well it was worth a try anyway, and we had to get geared up before we launch any major offensives as it is. It is time though, that we take the war right to young Harry's doorstep. I want you to find out where he will be staying over the Winter Holidays. With any luck it will not be the Weasley residence, and we will be able to strike him directly."

"What do you mean with any luck? Wouldn't that be an ideal place to get all of them at once?"

"Not anymore Snape, the house and its environs were put under Fidelius last week, and made Unplottable to boot. I sent Peter over there on a scouting mission and he couldn't find the place.....and this is a man that lived there for thirteen years. We know it's somewhere around Ottery St. Catchpole of course, but that's it. Who in the Order will have knowledge of his whereabouts?"

"Well Dumbledore of course, that was part of the deal, that Potter keep him informed of his living situation....and Potter has been very rigidly sticking to his part of the deal thus far. The werewolf I imagine as well, they have been getting along much better lately. The only other ones I would be sure of are the Weasley parents."

"Use those two to find out where he's going to be. I can't see him cooped up in their house the whole time and he'll want to do some wandering."

"Whatever you say Master. May I have your leave to be creative with my questioning?"

"Just find out what I want to know Snape, and then you can have your fun."

"Yes Master, it will be done as you ordered."

Monday, December 15, 1996

Office Wing, Hogwarts

Harry and Professor Bliss finished their lesson on shield charms and sat back in their chairs, both exhausted. Harry had seen at Lucius' trial how effective the advanced shield charms could be, and he had been working almost exclusively with Bliss on master the three main ones. He was now at the point that she could fire heavy curses at him for fifteen minutes before his shields even started to give.....even then he would have about two or three minutes before they failed completely. Bliss' own shields could only last that amount of time, and these were things she'd learned ten years go during Auror training. This wasn't something he was ready to teach the executive council quite yet, though he would share it with his inner circle sometime during the holidays. They were the only ones who knew that he was getting these lessons, and Harry took pains to keep it that way, going to and from his lessons disguised in his Invisibility Cloak. Harry took a small package out of his pocket and enlarged it, handing it to his Professor.

"Happy Christmas Professor Bliss, a small token of my thanks for all you've done for me."

"Well thank you Harry, shall I open it now?"

"Sure thing, though you'll never guess what it is."

She did so, and unwrapped the package to find a medium sized, ornate looking key.

"OK, you were right on that score. What it is? I'm guessing it's not the key to a building."

"Not exactly. It's called a Skeleton Portkey, something the twins found in Knockturn Alley....don't ask. What it is, it's a portkey that lasts for ten uses, and all you have to do to program it is tap it with your wand and say 'Program', and then speak your destination, then you say 'Activate', and you're all set."

"My, my, my.....this will be useful. Thank you very much Harry."

"You're welcome Professor, but please don't show it to Professor Shepherd until after I give him his tomorrow night."

"No problem Harry. This guy who made these....you bought up his entire supply didn't you?" Harry laughed.

"Most of them anyway, I think. Am I getting that predictable in my old age? You see I never met the man personally; I did everything through Fred and George. They only cost me 20 galleons each since I bought so many of them. The guy created the spell for it, so he has a monopoly on it so far, and apparently they're easy to make once you know how to do it. Anyway, I'd better get back upstairs, use the key in good health Professor."

"I will Harry, and thanks again."

Saturday December 20, 1996

Gryffindor Common Room

6:00 pm

There was a massive gaggle of boys gathered in their dress robes milling around the Common Room. The first three years had all been sent up to their rooms to make room for everyone, as there was a lot of primping going on even among the boys. The girls were all either in their rooms or in the bathrooms, putting the finishing touches on themselves and their outfits. Harry, Neville, and Ron had consciously bought robes of different colors, so they wouldn't look like some muggle music act. Harry was wearing navy blue robes, Ron scarlet ones (he had already outgrown the robes that the twins had bought him), and Neville's were purple.....which Tracey had said was her favorite color by the way, which explains everything. They were among the few boys with dates outside Gryffindor, so they weren't waiting for their dates now, in as much as they were waiting for Ginny.

When she came down Harry and Neville both whistled out loud, drawing a hard double elbow from Ron that left them gasping for breath (and even Ron had to admit, clinically, that she looked great). She was wearing really nice robes of a kind of pink color, and was even wearing some makeup, which she rarely wore. She smiled at the whistles and approached the boys with a mock impatient air.

"Well fellas, what are we waiting for? C'mon, let's go." Ron threw up his hands in pretend exasperation and gave her a playful shove toward the door. They all had their wands discreetly hidden, as they were heading to the Slytherin Common Room first, for Neville to pick up Tracey, and to get Blaise and Daphne. They didn't think a scene was likely, as Professor Shepherd was going to be there, but you know never knew with Draco Malfoy involved what might happen. They got there quickly enough, and the door was open, with Professor Bliss waiting by it.

"Go on in you four; Blaise is in there waiting, I don't think the girls are quite ready yet." They cautiously did as she said, and spotted Blaise standing right by the door. He also gave a whistle at Ginny's dressed up look. She looked at the other boys.

"Did you gumps rehearse that?" Harry and Neville pretended not to know what she was talking about. After a couple minutes of chatting, Tracey and Daphne emerged from their hallway together. Neville approached his girlfriend and presented her with a rose that he had hidden in his robe pocket. She took it; right as Draco and his crew came out, meeting up with Pansy and Millicent (who apparently was the date for both Crabbe and Goyle). They made their catcalls and insults across the room as Tracey rewarded Neville with a big kiss for his gesture. Neville took her hand and walked back toward the others, while behind his back he gave Malfoy his middle finger. Malfoy looked for a minute like the world had gone mad, Longbottom insulting him, and in his own Common Room no less. But with Professor Shepherd there he couldn't do anything about it.

Next stop was Hufflepuff, where Susan was waiting with Justin and Hannah (his girlfriend since September). Ron repeated the rose trick, and got the same response. Everyone else looked at Harry and Neville.

"Well that one we did rehearse, a nice touch we thought. It was Ron's idea, and Neville and I cheerfully stole it."

They nodded as if that made quite a bit of sense, and it did. The final pickup was at Ravenclaw, after which Ron and Neville were grousing good naturedly about needing to have friends in all the Houses. Harry and Justin reminded them that jogging was at 7:00 am six days a week if they wanted to get their lazy bums in shape. The girls all started needling those two about girls liking guys who were in shape, so it appeared as if the jogging club might have two more members, however reluctant.

As it was the last House, everyone was ready and waiting for them. Harry did his rose thing with Luna, who gave him the longest kiss of all so far. Everyone in the inner circle assumed that they did much more when they were alone with each other, but Harry greeted even the most subtle inquiry with a dull, stupid look that discouraged any further questions. Anthony was typically tongue-tied when greeting Ginny, and gave her a bunch of flowers that he had gotten sent to him from home. She looked over at the other boys, and Neville spoke for them all.

"Hey, we didn't tell him."

Ginny looked very happy at that, and gave Anthony a nice hug and a quick kiss on the mouth for his thoughtfulness. Lisa and Terry were ready as well, and the group made its way to the Great Hall, where tables were set up according to reservations done earlier in the week. Harry's group had the largest one, at fourteen people, and everyone sat down to dinner. Ordering the food was done in the same manner as at the last Ball, two years ago, and soon the room was enjoying some great food. All of the teachers and staff were there as well, and Dumbledore leaned over to McGonagall.

"Well Minerva, I'll say this for Harry, he has united the Houses in a way that no other student has in a long time, if ever. Look at his table: four Gryffindors, four Ravenclaws, three Hufflepuffs, and three Slytherins, and four of the couples are mixed House couples."

"He's maturing Albus; he's getting over petty rivalries and spending time with people he happens to like, rather than who he's supposed to like. I like the changes in him, overall.....Lily and James would be very proud of him."

Dumbledore had no immediate comment on that; Bliss, who had overheard that exchange, thought that Dumbledore was more worried about the unifying rather than welcoming it. She looked around the floor and noticed Hermione sitting with Colin and Dennis, who had been invited by a fourth year Gryffindor named Jessica Adams. Dean and Seamus were with Parvati and Lavender, though it was hard to tell who was dating who, if the kids even knew or cared themselves. Malfoy and his gang were at two tables off in the corner, and looked to be having a good time, ignoring all the other tables.

Dancing this night was done to music provided by the Wizarding Wireless Network, who was piping commercial free music into Hogwarts that night, in honor of the Ball. Harry and Luna danced a few times, though it was not something either of them especially enjoyed. Ron and Susan were the most eager dancers, and seemed to always be out of the floor. For one song, while Luna was dancing with Blaise, Harry approached someone he owed something to: Parvati.

"Hi Parvati, I know I was a lousy partner a couple of years ago, but may I have a dance to make up for it?"

"Sure Harry, lead on." They chatted amiably while the dance was going on, and Harry apologized again for being such a bad date last time. Parvati assured him it was no problem, and that she was glad that they were friends now. She gossiped to him that Hermione and Colin seemed to be getting pretty serious, there was talk that they would be visiting each other for Christmas (she hadn't heard who was going where).

There were no incidents during the dance, as the Heads of Houses had threatened expulsion for anyone drawing first, even as a prank. Malfoy and his people left pretty early, which made everyone relax even more, as they danced and talked the night away.

Number 12 Grimmauld Place

10pm

Bill and Ashley Apparated to the street outside Headquarters and ran into Remus there, he was coming home from what appeared like a date as well (he was all spruced up anyway). Remus was the only one who lived full time at Number 12 Grimmauld Place, though others would spend nights there at times. He had been pretty liberal about letting people come and go in his house.....though his standing rule with Dumbledore is that Snape was only to be there for official meetings and private chats with Dumbledore himself. Every time he saw Snape now he remembered those photographs of Winky's, of Snape attacking a defenseless Harry.....and it was so tempting to lock himself in a room with Snape while he was undergoing a werewolf transformation. He had resisted temptation thus far, but knew that sometime soon Snape was going to die at the hands of someone in the Order, it was inevitable. On spotting Bill and Ashley, the first thing he noticed was the ring, and he goggled.

"Well, well.....I see you have a new decoration Ashley. Are congratulations in order?"

"Yes they are, Bill and I are engaged." Ashley's smile could have lit up a decent sized town, as could Bill's. Remus shook his hand, and gave Ashley a warm hug as they stood outside the door.

"This is wonderful, are you going in now to tell your parents? I think they're supposed to be here right now."

"We are, so far only Charlie knows that I was going to ask, I wrote him before I bought the ring."

"Yeah, so that he could talk you out of it." She slapped his arm, but her grin didn't diminish.

"Not bloody likely my darling. I had to tell someone ahead of time, and Charlie will always be my best friend. He'll be my best man of course."

"When is the big day going to be?"

"Sometime in March we think, we're going to have it at the Burrow. I don't have any brothers or sisters, so it will be easier to bring my parents and grandparents over here than cart all of the Weasleys and friends over there."

"We'd better go inside now, its cold out here and I want to see the look on Mum's face when we tell her." With that the three of them went inside. They went in quietly, so that they could surprise Arthur and Molly. The fact that the portrait was no longer there helped this immensely, Bill mentally patted himself on the back for his wall-work on that score. They heard Snape's voice from the kitchen, though not any specific words.....you could tell from the tone that he was having fun though. As they got nearer to the kitchen, they heard Snape yell out Avada Kedavra, and they saw the glow of green light.

Remus was in front, and he didn't hesitate once he saw the light and charged into the room with his wand drawn. Unfortunately Snape had heard someone approach and was ready, he took aim and fired.

### Avada Kedavra

Remus fell dead immediately, and Bill and Ashley, who were following mere inches behind him, both managed to shout out Stupefy before Snape could summon his magical energy again. They were fortunate that Avada Kedavra takes enough magical energy that one cannot just fire it off like a bullet from a gun. Snape dropped like a rock when hit by the twin spells and slumped to the floor, hitting his head on the counter-top to boot. Bill stood panting as the horror of seeing his friend killed right in front of his sunk in. He was still looking at Snape's unconscious form when he heard Ashley cry out.

"Bill, oh my God Bill!" He turned to look at what she was pointing at, and it took a few seconds for his brain to process the images his eyes were presenting it.

He saw, tied with magical ropes to kitchen chairs, the clearly dead bodies of his mother and father.

Author's Note: Well that last chapter certainly got a response didn't it? Like Chapter 10, a lot of readers who don't normally review were brought out of the woodwork, which is great to see. The main question from the reviews seems to be 'why?'. Well I'm not going to answer that here, you'll find out when you read the next chapters, but I will promise you that there is a method to my seeming madness. The end of this chapter will mark the halfway point in the story (words-wise, roughly), and the turning point as well. On another matter, I've gotten a few questions over the last few chapters about why I don't accept anonymous reviews, and whether it's just an oversight on my part....it isn't. As you just saw last chapter, I write some controversial plots and subplots, which beg for people to disagree with me (though that's not really why I do it). My feeling is, if you're going to write a negative review, put your name on it.

This is a PG-13 story, and will remain so. There will be a certain Snape scene that cries out to be done in rated R fashion, but I won't go there, much as I dearly would love to. Just use your imaginations.

Saturday, December 20, 1996 (continued)

Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London

Bill's mind was swimming as he vaguely heard the sobs of his fiancé as he tried to process what was happening here. He walked forward and touched his parents' faces briefly, them Remus', confirming that they were dead. His mother's face was colder, implying that he had been dead longer, but Bill was no forensic expert. He cleared his head long enough to look at Ashley, and in a hollow voice he addressed her.

"Ashley, please go over to the floo and get the twins for me. I need to.....I need to secure Snape and....."

She didn't let him finish, but walked over and held him tightly. He squeezed her hard, but didn't give into the extreme grief he knew was coming. Things had to be done first, and he let a little bit of his rage flow free, which ironically calmed him down for a time. He kissed her softly, stemming the tide of tears flowing from her.

"Please go get the twins now; we need some help before we get the others." She left the room and walked over to the fireplace. She threw the powder into it, and after hesitating a second:

"Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes! Fred, George! Come to the floo now!" After a few seconds she saw the head of Lee Jordan pop into the fireplace.

"Oh hey Ashley, the guys are busy downstairs working.....no really, they are, our women are having a girls' night out." He paused when he saw the tears coming down her face. "Uh oh, what happened?"

"Just please get them, and come with them over to Grimmauld Place, and bring your wands....hurry Lee." He disappeared from the fire and raced to go get his best friends.

Meanwhile in the kitchen: Bill had debated moving Snape's body over to one of the other kitchen chairs, but ultimately decided to leave him where he was. He went over and searched him, pocketing his wand, but not finding any portkeys or any other escape devices. Bill didn't touch the three dead bodies again; he could hardly bear to look at them. He put an anti-Apparition ward around the room, and waited for his brothers to come.....which they did after about two minutes, and at a full run (which caused Bill to almost throw up, as that was how Remus died, running full bore into this room), followed closely by Lee and Ashley. Fred reacted first:

"Oh no.....oh my God.....please tell me this isn't real Bill." George was weeping silently, Bill had never seen either of them cry since they were babies, and a tear formed in his eye as he went over and hugged his brothers, he was holding on for dear life, trying not to have a breakdown.

"They're gone guys, they're gone and we have to be strong now for Ron and Ginny and Harry. We have to be strong." Lee was also not doing too well, but had enough focus on his mind to point at Snape.

"He did this? He AK'd them?"

"I think so, yeah. We know he killed Remus that way, Remus was coming in with us to tell mom and dad....." He hung his head and couldn't finish the statement. The twins saw Ashley's hand covering her mouth, and saw the ring on her finger. They both walked up to her and hugged her.

"I'm sorry guys, I'm so sorry." They just held onto her tightly as they cried. Bill gathered himself and took his necklace off.

"Lee, I need you to go get Charlie for us. This is a one way portkey that goes directly to his living quarters at the Dragon Preserve in Romania. He has a matching one that will take you both back to The Burrow, just floo over here when you get there. Tell him what happened only if that's what it takes to get him to come with you, otherwise I should be the one to do it.....but I have to stay here for now to make sure nothing else happens. Please hurry mate."

"I'm on it Bill, we'll be here before you know it." Lee grabbed the necklace and gripped his wand.

"Activate." He disappeared.

"Guys, will Dobby come if you call him? Or does it have to be Harry who does it?" Fred disengaged himself from his brother and future sister.

"Dobby! Winky!" Dobby and Winky popped in, and didn't immediately grasp what had happened. They looked quizzically at Bill, and the expression on his face told them everything they needed to know. Dobby at once got a feral look on his face, and advanced on the still unconscious form of Severus Snape.

"Not yet Dobby, there will be a time for that. I want you to go over to my apartment and into my desk. In the bottom right drawer there are three vials of Veritaserum, please bring them here. Winky, go with him and pack a bag for Ashley and myself and take it to The Burrow, the whole family will be staying there tonight." Bill was thinking clearly now, putting his own grief aside so that he could be there for his family.....a family that he was the head of now.

"Yes Mr., Bill, it will be done now." They popped away and the four of them stood there staring at each other without talking. They were soon interrupted by Charlie and Lee.

"What the hell happened here? How did that nutcase kill our parents!" It was clear that Lee had been forced to share the information in order to get Charlie to come with him. Charlie was shaking like a leaf, both from grief and from rage.

"I don't know Charlie, I don't know. We're going to find out though, however brutally we have to ask him. I need you and the twins to stay here and keep a watch on things, while I go get the kids. Don't do anything to Snape yet, we need to question him first. I sent Dobby to go get my supply of Veritaserum so we can do it properly. I'll tell that bastard Dumbledore to assemble the Order here in an hour, so they can hear the traitor speak. Leave Mum and Dad and Remus here in the kitchen, I want Dumbledore to see his friend's handiwork up close and personal. Got it?" Bill had always been their leader, and the other three Weasleys nodded their heads. "Good, Lee come with me. The rest of you start warding the house against any intrusions but ones from the floo, and I want one of you to stand by the fireplace with your wand drawn at all times, just in case. When everyone is here we'll shut it off. Anyone with a hood on comes in here, kill them." He walked out of the room, followed closely by Lee.

"Bill, before we get to Hogwarts I have to ask this: What if Dumbledore doesn't let them come?"

"He will, or I'll make him wish for death.....but he will, though like with Charlie we might have to tell him then and there. We'll floo right to his office, there's a direct connection between these two fireplaces (one can assume that not just anyone can floo right to Dumbledore's office). C'mon, let's get it over with." He threw the powder in and said, "Dumbledore's office!" Lee did the same next, and they were gone.

The dance was not quite yet winding down at this point, and Harry's group was mostly at their big table chatting away. Out of all the mixed House tables at the Ball, and there were more than a couple, these were the kids who spent the most time together. They were having a merry old time until it happened: The doors of the Great Hall crashed

open very loudly, and the various conversations quieted down immediately as an angry looking Bill strode through the doors, with an equally serious looking Lee right beside him. Dumbledore and McGonagall had been dancing together, but stopped immediately when they saw the two come through the door. Bill and Lee headed right for Harry's table, and the teachers walked over to meet them there.

"Well Bill, this is a pleasant, if unexpected, surprise." Bill wanted nothing more than to rip the smile right off Dumbledore's face, but kept hold of himself for the time being. He saw that all of his family was at the table, most with worried expressions on their faces.

"Albus we have had a situation develop at Headquarters involving my parents and I need to take my family there now." He had never called Dumbledore anything other than Professor or Headmaster before, but from this point on he would never use those titles to his face ever again.

"What happened Bill, are Mum and Dad OK?" Ginny started to panic when he didn't answer right away. No one was saying anything, but she could clearly see Lee's hand in his pocket, gripping his wand.

"We need to go now kids, Dobby and Winky will come back for your stuff tomorrow."

"Bill, I must insist that you tell me what's going on." Dumbledore was slightly taken aback at the looks that passed over Bill's and Lee's faces, this could not be good.

"There will be an Order meeting thirty minutes from now at Headquarters, you'll get your answers then." He patted Harry on the arm and signaled for him to follow. Harry, Ron, and Ginny got up and started to go with Lee. As the four of them walked out, Bill hung back and turned to look at Dumbledore, who was still looking dubious about the three students leaving like this.

"Just make sure all the Hogwarts Order people are there in thirty minutes. Neville, Luna, c'mon let's go." Neville and Luna had been looking at each other, wondering if they should go with their friends.

They got up and silently went with Bill out the door and back up to Dumbledore's office, to floo back to Headquarters. Ginny and Ron were plying their brother with questions during the entire walk, but Bill wasn't saying a word in response. Finally Ginny had had enough, she stopped right outside of the Headmaster's office.

"Bill, I swear I'm not moving another meter until you tell us what's going on! What happened to Mum and Dad?"

"You'll find out in a minute Ginny, I don't want to talk about it here, the walls have ears." He went up the stairs, having left the door open from earlier (he didn't much care if someone infiltrated that idiot's office). The others went after him and they flooed to Grimmauld Place, where Ashley was waiting for them. Once all seven of them had exited the fireplace (Bill had gone first):

"Now kids, what you're about to see is going to be hard to look at.....and I'm sorry about that, I just don't know how else to do it." With that, he led them into the kitchen.....where mercifully, someone had untied Molly and Arthur, and set Remus up on a chair as well. Snape was still on the ground, but the magical ropes were now on him, tying him almost mummy like, as well as a sock being in his mouth to gag him (literally, someone's sock). The twins and Charlie were all in there waiting for them. Charlie nodded at Bill that the work was done as he had ordered.

Ginny fell to her knees immediately and started wailing, and Ashley and Luna went over to her and held her. Ron just stood there and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Charlie grabbed him from behind and hugged him close as Ron's knees buckled and he fainted. Fred and George were carefully eyeing Harry, who hadn't moved a muscle since he entered the room and saw what had happened....but they could see the rage building within him quickly:

BLAST!

Every piece of glass in the room shattered as with inhuman speed Harry pounced on Snape and began punching him in the face as hard as he could. Fortunately for Snape (who had regained consciousness

a couple of minutes earlier), and for the answers within him, the twins were prepared for this and managed, with Neville's and Lee's help, to haul him off the murderer. They shoved him against the back wall and it took the four of them to keep him there for a moment while he struggled against them. Bill felt that this was only going to be good for a few seconds; given Harry's power, if he wanted free.....there was nothing anyone could do to stop him.

"Think Harry, we need to question him, we need to find out what happened. Merlin knows I want him dead worse than you do, and I promise you we'll get our revenge.....but after we find out WHY. Think Harry." Harry stopped struggling when he heard that, and Bill sighed with relief, there had been enough murders so far and he had no wish to fight a losing duel against his protégé.....and the look in Harry's eyes was one that he never wanted directed at him.

"All right, let me go now.....I won't kill him yet." They turned him loose and he went immediately over to Ron, who Charlie had woken up. He and Ron embraced tightly, the way only family can with each other, and tears rolled down both their faces.

"Oh God Ron, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I should have sent him to Azkaban, this is my fault." Ron managed to collect himself for a moment and was about to answer before Bill spoke up instead:

"Don't even go there Harry, there is no possible way you could have foreseen this happening.....this is not your fault, or the fault of anyone's in this room. Snape killed them, not you.....and he will be punished for it." Ron looked around the room and didn't see someone.

"Are we going to get Percy?"

"I suppose we'll have to, but I can't bring myself to....." Harry was mentally back into it now, and he gently interrupted Bill.

"We'll need Fudge here anyway, to witness the confession, I'm sure he'll bring his dog with him."

"Good point, I'd better go start flooing Order members and get them over here." He left the room, and Ron went over to comfort Ginny,

who hadn't stopped crying. After doing several Reparo charms on all of the glassworks he had destroyed, Harry walked over to Remus.

"I'm sorry Remus, I'm sorry that we didn't get to have the kind of relationship I know you wanted. I know I was slow to forgive you for my childhood, but I guess I always thought there would be more time.....but I was wrong, and I don't know how I'll be able to live with myself." He didn't hear Luna come up behind him, and softly she said:

"He knew you loved him Harry, that's all that mattered to Remus really. All he wanted was what was best for you, and like you he made mistakes, but there were no mistakes made that were unforgivable. You'll meet him again in the next life Harry, and you'll have lots of stories to share with each other." He put his arm around his girlfriend and took in her words.

"I hope so Luna, I hope so. I'm sure he had a nice reunion with Mum and Dad, and Sirius. Charlie, what happened here exactly?" Ashley answered for him, as Charlie couldn't stop staring at his parents.

"We met Remus at the front door a little while ago, he was just coming home himself. I guess Snape was working on Arthur and Molly and killed them when he heard us come in. We heard the last Avada Kedavra, and Remus went running into the kitchen, but Snape was ready for him and killed him. Bill and I stunned Snape before he could fire again though. Fred found an alarm charm on the front door and another on the floo, so he would be aware of any intruders."

Snape had woken up again, and his hate filled gaze was centered slowly on Harry. One eye was swelling shut, and there was still a trickle of blood coming out of his nose. Harry walked up to him as Bill came back into the room:

"You are going to die very, very badly Snape.....I promise. I could make it relatively painless if you agreed to tell us all that you know.....but thanks to the miracle of Veritaserum I'm spared making that kind of deal....and I've made too many deals lately as it is. You're going to spill all the secrets inside you, then I'm going to turn you over to the Weasleys so that they can have some release.....if there's

anything left of you then I'll finish the job myself." This was said in such a calm, flat voice, but nonetheless it made Snape shiver involuntarily, and there was now some fear in his eyes. Harry walked away from him, followed by Luna, who was not about to let Harry go anywhere by himself if she could help it. They went into the main dining room, where the Order members were to assemble in a few minutes.

"Luna, are you going to be ok with what happens here? I know you're a very peaceful person, and you don't want to hurt anyone you don't have to.....but Snape....."

"It's ok Harry, I can understand what you're feeling. I love you Harry, and I won't try to interfere with what you and the brothers feel you have to do.....as long as you don't expect me to participate. I hate Snape, but I don't think I can bring myself to torture him."

"I love you too Luna, and no I won't insist that you help us. I don't even know for certain if we'll get a chance to do anything to him, we'll need Fudge to cooperate, and you never know with him. You're wrong about it just being the brothers though; I expect that Ginny will be the hardest on him."

"What's going to happen to her now? I know Ronald turns 17 in a couple of months, so he's no issue."

"I would think that Bill will take custody of her for this summer, I don't know if he'll move into The Burrow though. I just can't believe they're gone Luna."

"What will Dumbledore do? He can't keep going to his same excuses anymore."

"That is the question isn't it? I think we're about to find out." They heard voices coming from the living room, and went to investigate. They found Bill and Dumbledore staring at each other, with the other Hogwarts Order members looking on (McGonagall, Bliss, Shepherd, Flitwick, and Hagrid).

"Oh good Harry, right on time. Let's show Albus the error of his ways shall we? If you'll follow me, 'sir'" Bill's voice was dripping with sarcasm as he said that last bit. He moved toward the kitchen, giving Dumbledore little choice but to follow him. The other teachers trailed behind him as they entered the kitchen.

"Do you like what you see Albus? Do you see what your friend did? He killed our parents! He killed Remus! Your man Snape did this you overconfident shit! What do you have to say to this! Eh!" Harry had never seen Bill so angry, though Dumbledore's confused look would have been amusing under most other circumstances. He decided to get his own licks in while the old fart was hesitating.

"I swear Headmaster, if you even imply that we staged any of this to make your pet look guilty: I'll AK you right here and now.....it would be worth living life on the run." Dumbledore turned to look at Harry with no small amount of horror, but was brought to reality by the twins.....who grabbed him and pushed him forward until he was right up close to the three dead bodies sitting in the kitchen chairs. Fred pulled a chair up right in front of the bodies, and George shoved Dumbledore into it.....after which, in turn, they each spit in his face.

"Is it real to you yet Dumbledore? You know we're waiting for an explanation."

"What happened?" This did not come from Dumbledore, but from Bliss. Dumbledore was now breathing more heavily than before, and if Harry didn't know better, he'd swear the old man was having chest pains.....he hadn't wiped the spittle off either. Bill explained to them briefly what happened, and even the teachers turned to glare at the old man (Hagrid was crying quite loudly). He had wrenched his face away from the bodies and turned it toward Snape.....and the look on Dumbledore's face was one of utter betrayal. Bill went over to him and pulled his head towards him.

"We're still waiting for an explanation Dumbledore.....we're still waiting for you to defend him."

"I don't know what to say Bill.....I'm very sorry.....I'm....."

"That's not good enough, but then again.....nothing you say will be good enough. You see the blood on his face? That's from Harry, it took four of us to pull him off your boy before he could kill him. Next time maybe we won't go to so much effort. Then again, if he does, the rest of us will need a rage outlet, won't we?" Dumbledore did not look scared yet, but he certainly noted that no one was coming to his defense. He put his head in his hands for a moment, but that didn't help him come to grips with what was happening.

"So what happens now? I'm assuming that you want to question him?"

"Yes we will, and I have some Veritaserum all ready and waiting for him. We're going to wait until the entire Order is here, plus a couple of other invited guests, and then we're going to have a nice conversation with your boy. You will of course keep your mouth shut, but you're also going to stay and listen to every detail of his confession, so we can find out just how stupid and blind you've been for the last fifteen years." He paused as he saw Harry and the twins leave the room momentarily, and before he could get started again Fudge entered the room, followed closely by Charlie and Travis Biller. Charlie was talking in low tones to the Minister.....who looked as shocked as anyone had ever seen him. The other teachers moved to talk to the rest of the Weasleys, softly offering their condolences.

"Minister, we were hoping you would be able to get Percy here for us. None of us knows where he lives now, so we don't have his floo address.....and we don't think he'd come anywhere that we ask him to. He should be here for this, even if he has disowned us."

"Certainly Bill, whatever you want. I'm.....I'm so very sorry, for all of you.....I know that seems like so little....."

"Thank you Minister, there really is little else to say is there?"

"Words do fail us at times like these. I'll go get your brother. I assume you want to question Snape?"

"Oh yes we do Minister, and with your permission we would like to do it here in front of the Order, so that they can see the errors and gross misjudgments that have been made by certain people."

"Yes indeed. I would like Travis here to be allowed to ask some questions if you don't mind, he's very good at interrogations, and an outsider's perspective might be useful."

"We would welcome anything that allows us to get the whole truth sir." Fudge left the room, simultaneously passing Harry as he came back into the kitchen, and walked over to where Bill was.

"What was that all about Harry? Where are the twins?"

"I sent them back to the shop to pick up a couple of things. I want an audio and video tape record of what is going to happen here. We can put up a damping field large enough for a video camera and an audio tape recorder, so that we can have the evidence be clear and incontrovertible. They have this stuff in the shop basement; they should be back in a minute or two."

"Good idea, you might need to show some of it at school to your allies." They heard more voices coming from the living room, as Moody, Tonks, and Kingsley came into the kitchen. They all reacted predictably, with Tonks being the most emotional, Kingsley keeping his own counsel as always, and Moody looking the angriest. After getting the story (Bill was getting very efficient at telling it now, to his own disgust), Moody rounded on Dumbledore:

"Well well Albus, your three main opponents within the Order all killed on the same night, by your favored son no less.....you know if I was a suspicious man I might make something out of that.....oh right, I am."

"Surely you can't be implying that I had anything to do with this?" This was the most animated Dumbledore had been since he got there.

"I'm not implying it, I'm stating it outright. You were Snape's only friend and booster within the Order, the rest of us wanted nothing to do with him, even if it cost us his spying services.....services that

weren't generating much in the way of intelligence I might add, given that the Death Eaters staged two simultaneous raids quite successfully, without us even hearing a hint about it. Never mind that you let Snape torment your so called 'final weapon' for five years.....I wouldn't have blamed Potter one bit if he'd taken Voldemort up on his offer, given the way you've treated him over the years (Harry's jaw hung open after hearing that). It would not surprise me a bit if you allowed your protégé to kill those people, given that you've allowed him everything else he's wanted over the years."

"I will not listen to any of this; I certainly didn't tell him to kill anyone."

"We'll see Albus, Snape will spill everything under the Veritaserum, and I intend to make certain that we find out everything." Harry was staring at Moody with no small amount of admiration, before tonight he had thought that he was the only one with the sand to stand up to Dumbledore, now two people had done in less than half an hour, not to mention the twins physical manhandling of him.

"What did you people do to my parents!" Percy had entered the room now and was looking with anger at the bodies of his parents (he didn't bother to acknowledge Lupin). It was obvious to the non-Weasleys that Bill and the rest were torn on how to respond to their wayward brother, part of them wanted to hex him into the next life, the other part remembered that he was their blood, and wanted one last chance to work things out with him.

"Snape killed them Percy, and Remus too. It happened about an hour ago." Percy then did something totally unexpected.....he went up to Dumbledore and punched him in the face, a textbook right uppercut. The old man's head snapped back as blood began to seep from his split lip. He got up and started to draw his wand, he wasn't going to put up with being assaulted by Percy of all people.

## EXPELLIARMUS!

Four spells hit Dumbledore as Bill, Charlie and the twins made sure Dumbledore didn't touch their brother. Harry pocketed the old man's wand as he laid there in a heap on the ground. Percy didn't look too happy at that either.

"How many times did I tell you people that following that old fool would cost you? This is your fault, all of you!"

"Our fault? Why you stupid little shit, is that all you care about? Placing blame? Mum and Dad are dead!"

"They're dead Bill, because they chose the wrong side, they followed the wrong man. Even after Potter split from him....and who knew that he would be the smartest one in your group..... they still remained members of your pathetic little Order.....and look what happened? If they had listened to me in the first place none of this would have happened and they'd be safe at home and asleep in their beds right now. I want answers here, but after that I'm done with you people for good, I'll change my name if I have to."

"Fine Percy, you never did care about us anyway." This was said by Ginny, who had stopped crying and was now getting pretty angry at listening to her brother. She made her point even more forcefully by kicking her jerk brother in his 'old fellow', making him double up in pain. Bill took Percy's wand and threw it to Charlie, and looked at his brother with disgust.

"If that's what you want Percy, I'm not going to argue with you about it. Harry's pretty much taken your place in the family anyway.....and even better, since he loves all of us in a way that you never bothered with. After tonight, I'm going to wash my hands of you Percy, there will never be a place for you at The Burrow as long as I'm alive."

"Your life and never are two different times Bill, don't ever forget that." Fortunately for Percy's long-term health, Bill chose to ignore that comment. Charlie and the rest of his siblings walked up to Percy in turn and said, with various word choices:

"I'm washing my hands of you Percy, you're on your own from now on."

Harry stayed very quiet and unobtrusive while this was happening; he was more than a little relieved that he wasn't being made a focal point

of this fight, even though both sides had mentioned him. He didn't feel it was his place to add his two pence to the discussion, and simply stood next to Luna and Neville while the Weasleys had it out.....though both he and Neville had winced involuntarily when Ginny nailed Percy. Percy walked away, gingerly, into the dining room, where he brooded by himself. It was very telling that at no point did Fudge interfere on behalf of his subordinate, remaining quiet and expressionless as the Weasleys settled their family business in such a semi-public setting.

After about twenty more minutes, the entire Order of the Phoenix was assembled in the main dining room, along with certain guests (Fudge, Percy, Biller, Bones, Ashley, and the kids). Everyone had seen the kitchen scene and gotten the thirty second story from either Bill or Ashley. After everyone had arrived, Bill had Dobby seal the floo, and Winky had removed the bodies and put them in an upstairs bedroom (the funeral home would be contacted in the morning). Dumbledore, having finally been woken up and who hadn't had a friendly word said to him since he arrived, sat at the head of the table.....but it was clear that this was Bill's show. He stayed standing while everyone either sat down, or stood along the wall (the kids mostly).

"Let's get this meeting of the Order of the Phoenix started. You all have seen why we're here: The murders of Arthur Weasley, Molly Weasley, and Remus Lupin. Severus Snape was caught at scene, and was seen murdering Remus Lupin. When Ashley and I entered the room, a second behind Remus, we found the dead bodies of my mother and father. Snape was stunned and is now in our custody. I called this meeting so that we can all hear his Veritaserum aided confession, and then we can decided on the future of the Order of the Phoenix.....if indeed it has a future as currently constituted. Fred, George.....bring in Snape."

The twins went back into the kitchen and dragged in their favorite former teacher. They could have levitated him magically of course, but they preferred to drag him, and if his head hit the door on the way in, so be it. They placed his chair right next to Dumbledore's on purpose, to highlight the alliance of those two men, an alliance that almost every Order member had argued against over the years, in some way. At Bill's request, Charles Shepherd administered a dose

of Veritaserum to Snape, and they all held their collective breath as they waited for it to take effect. While everyone was waiting, the twins set up the video camera and the audio recorder, established a very small damping field, and explained what they were doing. After about three minutes, Snape's eyes got very glassy, and he let out a big sigh. Bill led off the questioning:

"What is your name?"

"Severus Snape."

"Where do you live?"

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Every head in the room turned toward Dumbledore, and it was all Harry could do not to kill him right then and there.

"Where in Hogwarts?"

"I live in a room off the Headmaster's Office; I use the floo in there to get where I need to go." Harry looked at Dumbledore and drew his index finger across his throat.

"Why do you live there?"

"Dumbledore wanted to keep close tabs on me, and he wanted regular reports on Voldemort."

"Where do your loyalties truly lie? With Dumbledore or with Voldemort?"

"With Voldemort."

There it was, proof that Snape had been playing them for fools.

"Were they ever with Dumbledore?"

"No."

“You were never a spy for the light side?”

“No.”

“Did Voldemort set this whole cover story up?”

“Yes he did, he wanted a window into Dumbledore’s life and operations.”

“Dumbledore once told us a story about how you came to him with doubts about being a Death Eater, and that’s how you turned to our side.....was this all a lie? Tell us what the plan was.”

“Yes it was, Voldemort wanted a way inside Dumbledore, and a method for dealing with Death Eaters who were in danger of wavering or becoming disloyal. He couldn’t kill all of them, since it would hurt our recruiting, so he sent me to the other side, to betray those wavering and allow them to be captured by the Ministry. I never betrayed anyone that Voldemort wasn’t willing or eager to lose.”

“Was Sirius Black ever a Death Eater?” This raised some eyebrows, but Bill wanted to see what the answer would be.

“No, he turned Voldemort down flat when he tried to recruit him.”

“Was Remus Lupin ever a Death Eater?”

“No, Voldemort would never allow an approach to him, though some of our people suggested it to him.”

“When did Peter Pettigrew turn?”

“Over a year before the Potters were killed.”

“Who turned him?”

“I did, it was very easy.”

“How so?”

"I simply played on his insecurities, his knowledge that he would never rise to the same level as Potter and Black. I made sure he knew that Voldemort would value his talents as no one else would."

"And he bought that?"

"It was true; Pettigrew now sits at Voldemort's right hand."

"Who else is in Voldemort's inner council?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange and myself. He doesn't trust the others yet, particularly the ones that we recently freed from Azkaban." Snape was getting chattier, and giving out longer answers. This was a hallmark of Veritaserum as potions masters understood it, it tended to take a few minutes for it to fully relax the user's brain, hence Bill's strategy of asking 'yes or no' type questions to start with. With a nod to Bill, Travis Biller took over for a few questions.

"Where is Voldemort's hideout?

"I don't know."

"Who does know?"

"Pettigrew and Bella, they are the only ones he trusts to know it."

"He doesn't trust you?"

"He's afraid of what's happening right now, that I might be found out and put under Veritaserum."

"How do you and the others get there?"

"We portkey to a specific time and place, and one of them meets us and takes us the rest of the way. No one goes there without permission."

"When are you due to go back?"

"Monday morning, I'm to meet Pettigrew in muggle London."

“Where?”

“Outside Big Ben, at one of the newspaper vendors.”

“What time?”

“11:00 am.” Biller filed this away for future use.

“Why did Voldemort have Lucius Malfoy assassinated?”

“He was a failure whose only value was the money he spent. He and those other fools couldn’t take out six poorly trained schoolchildren.”

“Did Draco and Narcissa know that he was going to be killed?”

“Narcissa did, I don’t know about Draco.....I assume he did, but I’m not sure.”

“Did she approve of the killing?”

“Yes, though Voldemort told me it wouldn’t have mattered if she didn’t.”

“Were you at the Ministry that day?”

“No, I was part of the Azkaban raid.”

“Did the Dementors cooperate, or did they put up resistance?”

“They attacked us in force, it took many Patronuses to keep them off, and they almost broke through at the end.”

“Did you lose anyone at Azkaban?”

“No, we got all the prisoners out alive, and we didn’t lose any of the troops we brought.”

“Does Voldemort view the mission as a success?”

“Yes, he only lost Flint and six others, and gained so much more.”

“How did they get into the Ministry?”

“Magdalena Edgecombe’s office.”

“Is she one of you? For how long?”

“Yes she is, she’s been with us since the beginning.” Biller gave his boss an apologetic look as he asked his next questions:

“Is Minister Fudge one of you?”

“No he isn’t, he too resisted our recruiting.” Biller eyed Percy for a moment, he had never really liked the Minister’s ingratiating subordinate and was fully in sympathy for his brothers’ and sister’s view of him.

“Is Percy Weasley, or any Weasley a Death Eater?”

“No, we’ve never bothered to approach any of them.”

“Who else in the Ministry works for you?”

“No one that I know of, but there must be more of them. Our Lord doesn’t share a lot of his information with me.”

“What about the Hogwarts staff?”

“None.”

“What about the past staff? Was Umbridge Dark?”

“Not to my knowledge, she was just power hungry, like her boss.”

Biller got up and walked over to Fudge and bent down to whisper to him.

“I apologize for the question about you sir, I felt I should do it for the others’ benefit. May I have your leave to go arrest Edgecombe?”

“Certainly Travis, and don’t worry about the question, someone was bound to ask it. Go get her, and put in the most secure cell the Ministry has, maximum guards and full sensory deprivation. I want you to question her in the morning personally, and break her thoroughly.”

“Yes sir.” Biller walked over to Harry, whispered something in his ear, and proceeded to leave the room. Moody stood up and started pacing, he would be asking the next questions, and as a seasoned Auror, he knew the type of questions to ask:

“Did you kill Hestia Jones?”

“Yes I did.”

“How?”

“I ran her over with a muggle automobile.”

“What caused you to do that?”

“I had to get rid of her after I questioned her.”

“What did you question her about?”

“I found out more about the trouble between Dumbledore and Potter, and I found out the Prophecy.” All of the breath in the room was sucked in as they heard that. The secret had been out for almost four months.....and yet still, Voldemort had made his offer to Harry.

“You told Voldemort the Prophecy? What did he say to it?”

“He was curious about it, he wanted to know what ‘the power he knows not’ is.”

“So he doesn’t know what that phrase means?”

“No he doesn’t.”

“Earlier this month Potter got an offer from Voldemort to join the Death Eaters, was the offer genuine?”

“Yes it was, he felt that with Potter joining him, victory would be assured.”

“So it wasn’t a setup to lure Potter in to kill him?”

“Not to my knowledge, he seems quite fond of Potter, and he has a lot of respect for his abilities. He says that they have much in common, both in their upbringing, their power, and in their disdain for Dumbledore and the way he treated them both growing up.”

“How did Potter turn him down?”

“He sent a note back, with one word written in the text: NEVER, in all capital letters.”

“How did Voldemort react?”

“He didn’t seem terribly fazed by it, as if he was just covering his bases just in case. He was a little surprised that the answer came back so quickly. After that, he wanted to know Potter’s holiday plans, I got the impression that he wanted to force the final confrontation as soon as possible.”

“Did he tell you to question Molly and Arthur Weasley?”

“Yes he did, he felt that they would know what Potter’s plans were, and would be the easiest for me to get at.”

“Did he tell you to kill them?”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“Did you kill Molly and Arthur Weasley?”

“Yes I did.”

“How? With Avada Kedavra?”

“That was how Arthur died, right before Lupin ran into the room and I killed him with the same curse. Molly died under torture; I believe her heart gave out.”

“Why torture them? Why didn’t you use Veritaserum?”

“I wanted to exact some revenge, by hurting people Potter was close to, the fact that it was those Weasleys was one of life’s little bonuses.”

“Do you hate anyone worse than you hate Harry Potter?”

“No, I hate him more than anyone in the world.”

“Why?”

“Because the world was handed to him on a silver platter, because he is an ungrateful brat who has powers that he will never bother to fully explore.....because his father made my Hogwarts time so much like hell.”

“Did you expect your cover to be blown after killing Molly and Arthur?”

“No, I was planning to erase all traces of my presence here tonight.”

“How close did you come to finishing your work before you were interrupted?”

“Another five minutes perhaps, Molly Weasley had been dead for a few minutes already. I sped things up with Arthur when my alarm charms went off, that’s when Lupin came into the room and I killed him. I don’t know what happened after that, I’m assuming one of the adult Weasleys got me.”

“Do any other Death Eaters know where this house is?”

“It’s under Fidelius, so not exactly. They know the general area, and we periodically send people by, to watch for activity.”

“Why didn’t you have a portkey handy for an easy escape?”

“I didn’t want to raise any questions with Dumbledore; he might have seen it and become suspicious.”

“Did Dumbledore know of your true loyalties?”

“Not to my knowledge, though he must have suspected something after Jones was killed and they couldn’t figure out how it happened.”

“Do you believe that Dumbledore is sympathetic in any way to Voldemort?”

“He feels sorry for him to an extent, but I don’t believe he would ever join with him.” Harry signaled to Moody that he wanted to ask some questions.

“Was Voldemort behind the setting up of Sirius Black the night my parents were killed?”

“No, that was Pettigrew thinking on his feet. He fully expected to be found out and was ready to disappear when Black came upon him.”

“Were you really trying to teach me Occlumency last year? Or were you trying to weaken my mind for Voldemort?”

“I was trying open your mind for Voldemort, and it worked quite well.....or it would have, if that idiot Malfoy had done his job at the Department of Mysteries.”

“When you came to Surrey in July, you were going to break the Prophecy out of me weren’t you?”

“Yes I was, I have to grudgingly admit now that you were quite clever in setting me up like that. Voldemort was not happy with me afterwards.”

“Was he quiet all this time to let Dumbledore and I fight it out.”

"Yes that was why, plus he's been recruiting. He was greatly amused by the mini-war you two had going on, that's why he was so confident that you would at least consider his proposal." Harry then asked something he'd long wanted to know:

"Is Draco Malfoy a Death Eater?"

"Yes he is."

"Who else in Hogwarts is a Death Eater?"

"As far as I know, just Crabbe and Goyle, though many more are sympathetic and are candidates for the future."

"You had many chances over the years to kill me, why didn't you?"

"My Master didn't want that, he wanted to be the one to do it.....though he might have had me do it eventually. I was hoping so."

About twenty minutes had passed thus far, and Harry looked at his watch before approaching Charles Shepherd. Quietly he leaned in to ask him something.

"How long is that dose going to last?"

"Probably another ten minutes or so, but to be safe you guys should wrap this up soon. Given the dose I gave him, you won't be able to do this again for about 24 hours." The adults in the room seemed to know this already and were stirring slightly. Bill motioned for the twins to get Snape out of the room again, as Harry walked up to the grease ball, very quietly he whispered to him:

"Do you believe that you're going to die tonight?"

"Yes."

"Good."

The twins smiled broadly at Harry, they had overheard the exchange, and they dragged Snape back to the kitchen.....his head bouncing

along the floor with a pleasant thumping sound. When they returned (Dobby and Winky were guarding the prisoner), Bill got up to address the meeting.....until Fudge interrupted him politely:

"Bill, if I may, could I speak with you and Harry alone for a moment? Then I'll take my leave, as I'm not a member of the Order."

"Certainly Minister, come this way." Bill and Harry guided Fudge into the living room, and Fudge immediately put a Silencing Charm on the door.

"That was quite some confession we just heard, I'm surprised you didn't kill him right then and there."

"I didn't think you would allow that sir."

"Well Harry, let's just say that I'm more in tune with your desires than I would have been an hour ago. I'm supposing that you would like to take care of Snape yourselves?"

"Ideally, yes we would Minister." Fudge thought for a minute and seemed to come to some decision.

"One: No Unforgivable Curses.....Two: No underage magic by your brother and sister, or anyone else for that matter.....Three: Dispose of the body yourselves, and I mean dispose of it, I don't want it turning up somewhere."

Harry and Bill stared at his with confused expressions, as if waiting for Fudge to laugh and say he was kidding.....but he wasn't kidding. Harry got a crafty smile on his face and started laughing.

"Your conditions are most acceptable Minister Fudge, and I know just what to do with the body." Bill looked at him.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Where does your brother work Bill?"

"Who, Charlie?.....Charlie, oh my."

"In case you didn't know Minister, Charlie Weasley works at a Dragon Preserve.....and dragons are always hungry for meat." Fudge grinned at the two of them.

"You really are pretty devious Harry, I can't believe I wasted two years being your enemy, I would have been far better off employing your very useful intellect. Do it tonight if you can, it's so unfortunate that Snape will have hidden a portkey in his body somewhere that escaped notice during your search."

"Yes that would tragic wouldn't it? Dobby!" Dobby popped in from the kitchen.

"Tomorrow morning I want you to go to Gringotts and get a draft for 2,000 galleons, made out to The Committee to Re-Elect Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, then bring it to the Minister....don't let anyone else accept it but him."

"Yes Harry, it will be done first thing in the morning." He popped back to the kitchen and Snape.

Fudge looked mildly surprised at this exchange, but took it for what it was worth. He took a piece of parchment out of his pocket and scribbled on it for a minute, giving it to Bill.

"Just give that to Madam Bones before she has a chance to bring him to the Ministry. " He shook hands with the two of them, and before he left the room Harry had one more favor to ask him.

"Tell me Minister, how much do you need Percy in your office?" Fudge started laughing at hearing that.

"I could probably find a replacement if necessary....I take it you want me to sack him?"

"Not exactly sir.....it's just that The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department is now short a member, and you really should have a Weasley in the job, at least until Ron decides if that's where he wants to work."

"Consider it done Harry.....devious." Still smiling, Fudge went over to the floo and made the trip home.

"Are you sure about that Harry? Paying him off like that?"

"I wasn't bribing him, he laid out his conditions and didn't ask for a Knut.....I was just showing my appreciation for what he's allowing us to do. We'd better make it quick though, getting rid of Snape I mean. We don't want to give anyone a chance to rescue him. Are you going to make your play now for leadership of the Order?"

"Yes I am, it's pretty clear that we can't go on under Dumbledore. Are you with me?"

"I'm insulted that you even felt that need to ask."

"What did Biller whisper to you?"

"He wants me to meet him on Monday at the Leaky Cauldron, to talk about something."

"What do you think he wants?"

"Probably to act as another avenue from Fudge, or maybe he wants to join our reformed Order, who knows. He would be a very useful ally if we can get him."

Harry patted Bill on the shoulder and they went back to the dining room where the others awaited them. After escorting Percy out (he went willingly, he wanted no more part of this business), and he gave Bones the note from Fudge.....which she read with wide eyes, but nodded at Harry and Bill when it was obvious that they weren't going to move until she responded. Harry spoke first; the room had been pretty quiet when they came in.

"Ok, you all heard that, and there are some explanations that need to be given before we start debating. First, Headmaster (said with extreme sarcasm), why did you violate our deal and let Snape inside the castle.....not only inside it, but to live in it."

"It was like he said, I wanted him close by so that I could know immediately if Voldemort was planning something."

"And you felt that it was worth breaking your word to do that? Do you wonder why I don't trust you?"

"Yes I did, you know I only made that promise under duress Harry. I thought you were wrong, and I disregarded what you wanted.....to my everlasting regret."

"So you admit now that you've been played like a muggle bass fiddle for all these years?"

"Yes, I was tragically wrong, and I'm very sorry.....I apologize to each and everyone in this room for my mistakes and for my errors." Dumbledore closed his eyes and almost seemed on the verge of crying. Moody took the floor next.

"I think it has been obvious to many of us for a few months now that you have lost sight of what this war is all about Albus. You have focused far too much time and energy lately on Potter here, and not enough on what really counts. Voldemort has been quiet because he's been watching you and Potter go after each other like some muggle boxing match. I'm sure he felt that it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that you would goad Potter into killing you, solving one of his problems without his having to lift a finger. What I mean is, Albus, you have created one hell of a mess here. Now up to a point, I'm willing to let the Snape thing slide, though how he got you under his spell passes my understanding. Snape fooled more people than just those of us in this room.....except for Potter here, who few of us have given enough credit to apparently, for his intellect and his sagacity."

"What do you mean, 'up to a point'?"

"I mean that I insist that you either step down from leadership of the Order, or that you be removed by a vote of this body. Remain a member of the Order, yes.....we can certainly use your magical power and your counsel.....but know this: I will not remain loyal to any

organization that you are the head of. That's where I come out." McGonagall spoke next:

"Albus, I have never respected any wizard or witch more than I have you, and that still remains so.....but you erred here Albus, and badly. Your trust in Snape was so misplaced that it borders on criminal, and it has wound up costing us at least five lives this year alone: Black, Jones, Lupin, and Molly and Arthur. Not only did you rob Harry here of his childhood, you robbed him of the four adult figures he has grown to love and trust since he found out he was a wizard. I agree with Alastor in that I wouldn't blame Harry a bit if he went to Voldemort right now and offered him his services against you.....and against us. Now I know he won't do that, because that's the kind of man he is, but he has cause. I think it would be best if someone else took the reins of the Order, as it's my belief that you have lost our confidence as a war leader."

Next was Bones, who only recently had been inducted into the Order, at the private urging of both Bill and Dumbledore.....for quite different reasons. Dumbledore had been recruiting her for over a year, and only with Fudge demonstrating the side that he was really on, did Bones begin to be receptive. Bill wanted her in the group because he knew that Dumbledore needed a check on his actions, and by someone he had some respect for and would listen to. Plus, he knew there would be a time when Harry would need to take over, though he never imagined it would come like this.....and he knew that Bones thought pretty highly of him.

"I agree with them Albus, you have lost our confidence.....and there will be no deals here, I hope that's understood, since you are clearly incapable of sticking to them....even one so simple and straightforward as the one you made about Snape. Also, I'm fairly sure that Harry here and his allies would like you gone as much as anyone, and we need his cooperation." Mundungus Fletcher and Kingsley said much the same thing. Tonks was next, and had the first dissent of the discussion:

"Look here people, I know the man made a mistake with Snape, but like Moody said: Snape fooled everybody here, not just Dumbledore. Oh sure, he didn't fool Harry, but that was more of a function of Harry

hating him and wanting him to be Dark, than evidence that he actually was. I can tell you this, I will not remain a member of the Order if Harry is the head of it, and he's just not ready emotionally or maturity-wise for that kind of responsibility." There were a couple of nods from Order members that Harry didn't know very well, so he decided that he needed to nip this in the bud.

"I will tell you right now that I have no intention of becoming head of the Order, nor will I accept it if it's offered to me. Period." None of Harry's people looked the least bit surprised at this, nor did Moody.....everyone else though was more than a bit stunned, especially Dumbledore, who hadn't said a word since the debate had started. Bones collected herself first, and asked the obvious:

"Who do you think should be leading the Order then? I think most of us assumed that you would want control, since you're the one who has to kill Voldemort in the end."

"That's not for me to say Madam Bones, since I am not a member I won't tell you my preference just yet, though I do have one. I will say this, I will not cooperate in any way shape or form with this group if it does not remove Dumbledore. He has just made too many mistakes and misjudgments for me to ever trust him again. Like Moody said though, he should stay on as a member, and I agree he would be very valuable. But unless you want me to officially form a splinter group, get rid of him tonight.....I believe my group is the one that Fudge would respond to best if it came down to it."

No one argued that point, as Harry's alliance with Fudge had been much talked about within the group. Bill hadn't added his viewpoint yet, but there was no better time like the present:

"You can imagine where my family and I stand, and by my family I include Harry, who's just as much a Weasley as anyone. No one has been impacted by this mess more than we have, and we demand that a change be made. I feel confident that I speak for all the Weasleys in this room when I say: Dumbledore goes, or we go.....and I don't need to remind you that there are two fewer Weasleys in this room than there should be, thanks to Dumbledore's screw-ups. I'm putting a motion on the floor to remove Albus Dumbledore as head of the

Order of the Phoenix. All those in favor say Aye.” There was a loud chorus of Ayes to be heard throughout the room.

“All those against, say Nay.”

There were three Nays: Tonks, Daedulus Diggle, and Hagrid.

“I believe the Ayes have it. Albus, thank you for your service, we hope you will be willing to stay on as a member.”

“Of course Bill, if that is the will of the group, I’ll do what you people want.” Dumbledore had made no effort to defend himself throughout the debate, and seemed very resigned to his fate. He had smiled briefly at Tonks when she defended him, and nodded as well at her comments about Harry, but had remained quiet. He then asked what many of them had been thinking about since the debate started:

“Who is going to lead the Order now?” Most people again looked at Harry, while he had said that he didn’t want the job himself, ultimately he would have to sign off on the choice.

“While I respect all of you, and have no doubt that there are several in here who would do a fine job as head of the Order.....I think it’s clear that Bill Weasley is the best choice to lead.”

“So that you can run things from behind the scenes eh? You don’t want the responsibility, but you’ll take the power.”

“It sounds like you’re the one who’s immature Tonks, immature and whiny. I’m glad now that you resisted my overtures. No, as it happens, I won’t be running Bill, and anyone who knows him understands that. If Bill is leader of the Order, I will cooperate fully with it and I will follow his lead when it comes to the war.....I trust him that much.”

“You’d be willing to formally join then?”

“Of course Madam Bones, though invitations would also need to be forthcoming to my friends and family here,” he pointed at his inner circle. Moody knew that no other option would satisfy Potter, except

for possibly himself, and he wanted no part of the job personally. He decided to bring matters to a head right then and there.

"I nominate Bill Weasley to be the new head of the Order of the Phoenix. All those in favor, say Aye."

It was unanimous this time, apparently the three dissenters realized that theirs was a lost cause and wanted unity within the group. Bill stood up and addressed them.

"Thank you, I am honored to accept this post and I will do everything I can to see that things run smoothly. I would now like to invite Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and Peter Tyson to become full members of the Order, as they have done so much already to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters....their courage has been proven beyond measure."

"Thank you Bill, I accept with gratitude.....I'm very glad that the infighting and tension in our side is finally going to end." The other five accepted too, and took their places at the magically expanded table. Dumbledore asked another question on the mind of most everyone:

"What is to be done with Severus?"

"Harry and I want to talk with him some more tomorrow, when we can properly administer the Veritaserum again. After that, we'll turn him over to the Ministry. We discussed this with Minister Fudge and he approved. Snape will be held at The Burrow until such time as we are done questioning him and decide to release him."

Dumbledore and a few others looked dubious at this, but there was nothing he could say.....Snape had tarred him far too well. The meeting lasted another ten minutes, as Bill gave out some new assignments. It began to break up, but Dumbledore remained behind, as did McGonagall at his signal, and Tonks at Harry's. Bill looked at Tonks with a sense of dislike he had never had before, but Harry beat him to it.

"You know Bill, I think it would be a good idea for Tonks to continue following me when I'm around Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley. I have

no trouble with you knowing where I'm going on daily basis, and it would be wise to have another set of eyes and ears out there that the Death Eaters don't know about." Tonks took this in with as little facial expression as possible, but did seem to relax some.....maybe she thought she was about to get some payback or something.

"Good idea Harry. Tonks, keep to your regular schedule of being the unknown bodyguard.....outside of Hogwarts, you are not to enter the castle."

"That's fine Bill." Seeing that she wasn't needed anymore, she left. Dumbledore was next, and his question was primarily to Harry.

"What happens between you and I now Harry? Are you going to go to the Board of Governors and insist upon my removal?"

"No I won't, but neither will I protect you if they try to fire you. If asked by them, and I fully expect to be asked, I'll tell them that it's not for me to say one way or the other. Let them take whatever inference they want to from that. If they do decide to make a change though, I'll be honest when I tell you that I will strongly press for the appointment of Professor McGonagall though, instead of someone from the outside. I feel that she's easily the best qualified to run our school."

"I suppose I can't ask for more than that can I? I must say I'm fairly surprised that you didn't try to kill me in there Harry, I doubt anyone would have stopped you."

"You really don't know me at all do you Headmaster? That's where so many of your mistakes have come from, you haven't allowed for the possibility that I might grow up and evolve. For all your faults, and they are many, you are on the right side.....and that is what protects you from me. If you ever turn of course, I'll be the first to butcher like a prize hog.....that should go without saying. And when the war is over?.....we will have a discussion about our future." The implied threat served its purpose, and Dumbledore nodded in agreement that he thought similarly. Harry tossed Dumbledore his wand back, and the two teachers left, and now the only Order members there were Harry's group.

"Dobby, Winky, please search the house now and make sure that no one lingered behind, then reseal the floo connection so that no one can get back in." They left, and returned five minutes later.

"No one is in the house Harry, except for the Weasleys, Neville, and Luna.....and him." he pointed at Snape with an ugly look. Harry wasn't sure if House Elves would want to harm humans without self defense, but decided not to find out.

"Dobby, please go guard the floo, Winky, make your rounds of the house and see that the doors are secure. Both of you are to disregard any screams or cries that come from the room that we all occupy, are we clear?"

"Yes Harry, we understand."

"As soon as Remus' will is read, we'll get the Fidelius taken off this dump, something tells me he didn't leave it to Dumbledore.....speaking of Fidelius, do you have to recast it at The Burrow?"

"No we don't, I am the secret keeper, so it's still in place." They looked at each other and gathered themselves.

"Shall we do it in the kitchen?"

"Yeah, let's get it over with."

They went into the kitchen, where the others were waiting with Snape. Harry walked up to Snape and lightly slapped his face with the back of his hand, a gesture of contempt toward his hated enemy. The Veritaserum had worn off, and Snape was now gagged again. Harry removed it and bent down.

"Any last words before we kill you Snape?"

"Go to hell Potter, my Lord will get his vengeance for me. I won't be the only one in here dying before it's all over!"

"Maybe, maybe not.....but the only one in here dying tonight is you." He delivered another slap to the back of his head, and then it began. Bill muted the doors and windows, so that the muggles outside wouldn't hear anything.

## PAIN

When he looked back on it later, Harry had to admit that Snape was very tough, and his ability to take pain was almost awe inspiring. They worked him over for half an hour, with everyone getting their licks in.....even Luna took a token kick at Snape's personal areas. The two hours since the discoveries of the bodies had taken some of the edge off, but not much, as nine people made the last thirty minutes of the life of Severus Snape a living hell. Snape was just barely awake at the end, and Harry decided to end things now. He consulted with Bill and Charlie, and they told him that he should have the honor of finishing him off. Harry took out his wand (he hadn't used it to that point) and stood in front of Snape.

"Severus Snape, you have been convicted by the Order of the Phoenix of four counts of murder.....for that you are sentenced to death." He looked at his friends, his family, his trusted allies. He took aim at Snape's heart:

"This is a war, and we are soldiers.....and soldiers kill the enemy.....REDUCTO!"

Snape slumped in his chair, all the life in him was now gone.

Author's Note: The funerals are not going to feature long eulogies that will take me hours to write (my own father was eulogized for ten minutes by a pastor that he had never met), but I'm doing something appropriate I think. A question was raised about how Snape got the drop on Molly and Arthur, and since I'm not going to weave it into the story, I'll give you the simple explanation: Anyone can get the drop on anyone if surprise is on their side. Snape is a lot of things, and smart is certainly one of them. Tonks: Someone had to stay loyal to Dumbledore, and I chose her pretty early on. It's a different way to go I know, but as the long-time readers know, I thrive on turning conventions upside down.

Surprisingly the only multiple criticisms I got for the last chapter were that I wasn't brutal enough to Snape....and I quite agree that he deserved much more, but I had to keep it to PG-13. I've heard too many stories about yanking stories for crossing the ratings line, and I don't feel like getting suspended by them. I'm amused at the number of people sympathetic to Snape, and I'm reminded of something I read JK say in an interview, when a kid told her that Snape was his favorite character: "Is Snape your favorite character, or is Alan Rickman your favorite character?" I totally agree with her, given that of those actors who regularly play villains Rickman is probably the most charismatic (I don't view Hannibal Lector as the villain of his stories, so Anthony Hopkins doesn't count). Oh, and for the people who say 'Harry wouldn't do that'.....well he does in my story, and the same goes for the other characters. If you want pure, slavish canon, go re-read the five books.

Sunday, December 23, 1996

12:30 am

Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London

The tension in the room was now mostly dissipated, as so many frustrations had been vented. There wasn't much talking going on, as Dobby moved Snape's body to one of the upstairs bedrooms. It appeared as though everyone was waiting for someone to speak first. Neville managed first:

"Should one of us go back to Hogwarts tonight, to tell the others what happened?" Harry finished collecting himself and answered:

"I don't know Neville, that's a good question. The only safe way is to portkey into Hogsmeade and walk the rest of the way.....we don't dare risk discovery of our trunk system, especially now. Dumbledore is in shock, but he'll recover sooner or later. We can't let him have access to you, Ron, and Ginny where he can get you alone. He's going to want to know what happened to Snape, and given that what we did wasn't entirely legal, we have to take precautions. I agree that we should inform the others of most of what happened though. Winky!" She popped in from the living room, where she had been guarding the floo.

"Yes Harry?"

"Please go back to Hogwarts and get my set of mirrors, we have to do some communicating.....if anyone is even still awake.....How quiet can you be Winky?"

"As silent as you need me to be Harry."

"Ok, after you bring me the mirrors, go through Luna's trunk and into Ravenclaw Tower. Find the sixth year boys room and very, very discreetly, wake up Anthony. Motion for him to follow you into the Common Room, and then tell him to contact me via his mirror." Harry had gotten mirrors for Anthony and Tracey a few weeks previous, realizing that Neville and his girlfriend should have a private way of contacting each other, and that Anthony was his best friend in Ravenclaw (not counting Luna of course).

"Right away Harry." She popped away.

"What do you mean precautions Harry?"

"I mean that you, Ginny, and Neville are going to have to take a crash course in Occlumency during the holiday. We can't risk Dumbledore taking any of you aside and doing a little probing. I learned how to do it in a week, you lot have two weeks, we can get this done."

"What does it matter if he does find out? I mean he has to already suspect what we did." Charlie answered that one.

"Suspecting the truth, and knowing it for sure are two very different propositions Ron. Dumbledore was humbled tonight for sure, but he's still the head of the Wizengamot and can cause us some trouble."

"I think you guys exaggerate that, you've been worrying about Dumbledore trying for revenge ever since Comeuppance Night, and nothing has happened other than a few idle warnings, and Tonks following Harry around everywhere he goes."

"Constant vigilance young Ginny, we can't stress that enough.....remember, he can hit and miss; we can't miss once. Luna, I'd like you to work with Ginny and show her the basics on Occlumency from what I've been showing you. Ron, Neville, I'll work with you guys. Occlumency is pretty tiring, so we can only do this one hour a day for each of you.....but for two weeks, that should be enough. I'll schedule a lesson or two for each of you with Peter, if he has the time, which should be the finishing touch. Now that might not be enough, but at least we'll have done everything we can to minimize the danger to ourselves." Harry closed his eyes and sighed, this had been a long, very horrible day, and his grief was still there, bubbling beneath the surface. He decided that once he got done filling Anthony in he would go to bed.....and no sooner did he think that than Winky popped back in with the folder in which he kept his mirrors. They were marked on the back as to who had the connecting mirror, and Winky disappeared again, to go get Anthony.

"Charlie, when do you think it's a good idea to get rid of the body? Could you get away with it tonight?"

"I could Bill, but if I go back there tonight and tell them that my parents were killed, they're going to wonder what I'm doing there that night, and why I didn't just stay here. Our project head is a nice guy, but he's no fool, he'll suss something out. Besides, it's too late at night to try something like that, we're all pretty tired, and we need clear heads when we do this."

“Better to wait until tomorrow then, there really isn’t that big of a hurry.”

“Ron, Ginny, you want to come with me? I know you guys have never seen where I work.”

“Sure Charlie, that’d be great.”

Harry’s Anthony mirror was coming to life now, as his friend was on the other side.

“Harry, man what happened? What’s wrong?”

“Ron and Ginny’s parents were killed, as was Remus Lupin.” Anthony was horror stricken at the news, and his first reaction was predictable.....and quite noble.

“How’s Ginny taking it? Is she ok? Can I talk with her?”

“She’s not ok Anthony, I won’t lie to you, and she’s right here you can talk with her in a minute.”

“Do you know who killed them?”

“Snape did it, and we got a confession.”

“Oh bloody hell.....mother.”

“That’s what I thought too mate.” Harry gave him the two minute briefing, telling him only what he wanted the other exec council members to know. He assumed that Dumbledore would announce something at breakfast, and told Anthony to pay close attention to what the old man divulged. He then gave the mirror to Ginny so she could talk to him.....which started another round of tears from her as her unofficial boyfriend did his best to comfort her. After a bit of that, she handed the mirror back to Harry, who then promised Anthony he would let him know about the funeral arrangements as soon as he knew them himself. Bill took a look at the five exhausted teenagers before him, and three adults who weren’t looking too good either, and decided that it was time to go home. They all went to The Burrow,

with Dobby carrying Snape. Bed soon followed, though more than one person cried themselves to sleep that brief night.

Three of them stayed up a bit later, as Harry, Ron, and Neville struggled to get to sleep while in Ron's room.

"Harry, you awake?"

"What's up Neville?"

"Where did you get that idea with the boiling water?"

"It's something I've been thinking about for a few years, I saw it in a muggle television movie." Ron then asked something he'd wanted to for a few months now.

"Harry.....you got your full wand rights in July.....why didn't you go after the Dursleys after you moved out? I know you've wanted to for a long enough time."

"It wasn't the right moment Ron, not with Dumbledore shadowing me everywhere I went. I couldn't give him something to hold over me."

"So you're planning something against them?"

"The day after I graduate from Hogwarts, I'll be paying Vernon Dursley a visit, a visit that he will not care for at all."

"Are we going Dark mate? That was pretty brutal tonight."

"Voldemort wouldn't have been so kind to us Ron, we would have suffered much more at his hands."

"Is that all it is? Just a matter of degrees?"

"That's what happens when it's good versus evil. The advantage of the good side is usually strength in numbers.....but the bad guys have a freedom of action that most good guys don't have. They can taunt us and say 'your morals won't let you stoop to our level' that's

why Snape had to die Ron, to show Voldemort that we'll give it right back to him."

"He's right Ron; Voldemort will know what happened when Snape doesn't show up. He was high enough in Voldemort's council that he would have been broken out of whatever prison they sent him to. He had to die."

"I know, I know.....and I'm not saying I'm sorry about what happened. I just don't want us turning out like Snape or the Lestranges. It's a slippery slope guys."

"You didn't kill anyone Ron, I did. You simply vented a little rage and anguish, that's all. I'm not ashamed of what we did, it needed doing. It's ok to have doubts mate, we all have them. With any luck, this whole mess will be over by the time the school year is over, and we can enjoy our last year at Hogwarts in peace, and look forward to normal lives."

"Do you really believe that Harry?"

"I have to believe in something Ron, or else I'll go spare. Voldemort won't dare let me get better trained. Six months from now, one of us will be dead.....and it won't be me."

The talking died down after that, and the three lads gradually fell asleep.

Great Hall, Hogwarts

8:30 am

Dumbledore rose from his place at the staff table and prepared to make his announcement. Before he said anything, he carefully watched Anthony, Justin, and Blaise.....and was rewarded when they perked up when they saw him preparing to speak. That meant that either Harry had clandestinely returned to Hogwarts during the night, or that he had some kind of secret communications system with his friends (that he could have used an owl was a simplicity that didn't occur to Dumbledore). The old man didn't believe for one moment

that Harry was going to turn over Snape to the authorities, and correctly assumed that his former friend was dead already. An owl flew in, distracting him momentarily. It headed right for him, and deposited an envelope in front of him. He opened it and read the brief note, handing it to Professor Flitwick when he was done.

"I have a very sad announcement to make this morning. Last night in London, Remus Lupin, Arthur Weasley, and Molly Weasley were killed in a Death Eater attack." He paused as there was a stir in the room, and couldn't help but notice the looks of glee on the faces of Draco Malfoy and his allies. He had debated on whether to tell them who did it, but in the end he knew that Harry would make him suffer if he hid the truth. Plus he could tell that Harry's friends already knew.

"In a small note of good news, the Death Eater who killed them was captured, it was Severus Snape." The room quickly exploded into shouting. Now, tellingly, Draco did not look so happy, in fact he looked more than a bit worried. Dumbledore let the shouting go on for a few minutes, and then raised his hands for quiet again.

"I know many of you are close to Ron and Ginny Weasley, and many of you remember Remus Lupin fondly from his year as Defense teacher. Certainly all good thoughts should go out to them today, as we all grieve their loss. Funeral arrangements have not been set yet, but those of you who are friends with Ron and Ginny will be notified sometime after you return home. The train will leave today at 11 am; those of you leaving must be ready to board the carriages at 10:30 am with your belongings."

After the meal was over, and the students headed back to their dormitories to pack (only four students were staying at Hogwarts over the break, all of them pro-Harry Slytherins who were somewhat afraid to go home). Flitwick positioned himself by the door and stopped Marietta.

"Miss Edgecombe, will you accompany me to the Headmaster's office? There's something we need to talk with you about."

"Am I in some kind of trouble Professor?"

"Not at all Miss Edgecombe, not at all. Just come with me." They walked the corridor to Dumbledore's office, chatting about NEWT studying and the like. Marietta was a pretty good student, and had bright prospects after her graduation in June. Dumbledore greeted them at the door, and they walked upstairs still chatting.

"Miss Edgecombe, I'm sorry to inform you that your mother was arrested last night for suspicion of being a Death Eater, and being complicit in the attack last month at the Ministry." Marietta didn't look as surprised as she might have, but there were still tears forming in her eyes.

"Did she have anything to do with last night? With the killing of Ron and Ginny's parents?"

"I don't think so Marietta. I received a note from the Ministry during breakfast this morning that she has confessed to the charges. Her trial will be sometime after Christmas."

"I don't know what to say, I didn't think it would ever come to that."

"You knew of your mother's sympathies?"

"I knew she was against you and Harry, and she never had much to say about Minister Fudge one way or another. I didn't know that she was a Death Eater though, you have to believe me."

"We do Marietta, we do. And I know that others feel the same way. I doubt Mr. Potter would have taken you into his Defense group unless he was convinced of it."

"He's been great, he hasn't held any grudges over last year."

"What we now need to do is find out where you can stay over the holidays."

"I'm seventeen Professor Flitwick, I can stay by myself at the house. I've done it lots of times since my father died. The house elves take good care of things, and there's a trust from dad that will keep everything running."

“Good enough then Miss Edgecombe, we won’t make any announcement to the other students, though I imagine The Daily Prophet will carry the news tomorrow, as they will of the three murders from last night.”

“I’ll tell my friends on the train I guess. How did they know my mother was a Death Eater sir?”

“I shouldn’t want you to tell this part to your friends Marietta.....but she was implicated by Severus Snape last night after his capture. The Ministry had the Aurors arrest her, and she confessed under Veritaserum.” Marietta took this news pretty calmly again, leading Dumbledore to privately hope that Harry had vetted her carefully. He didn’t think she was part of Harry’s executive group, which seemed almost exclusively made up of people in his year (and was; only Cho, Katie, Colin, and Dennis were not from the sixth year students).

“Thank you Headmaster, Professor.....May I go now? I need to pack my things.”

“Of course Miss Edgecombe.....I know this sounds bad at a time like this, but I hope you have a happy holiday.”

“Thank you sir, you too.” Marietta left the office, but Flitwick remained behind.

“What do you think Filius, you know her better than I do.”

“I think she told us the truth, for what it’s worth. She clearly suspected something about her mother, but either didn’t want to admit it to us at the time, or possibly even to herself.”

“Do you think Harry trusts her?”

“I think in spite of himself he likes her, but no, I doubt he trusts anybody completely, outside of Ron and Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom.....and maybe Anthony Goldstein and Blaise Zabini.”

"I'm amazed that he's forgiven Miss Edgecombe so easily, but not Miss Granger."

"From what I gather, she hasn't apologized for anything Albus, and that seems to be a sticking point in her relations with Harry and his group. At least she's not being ostracized by the rest of Gryffindor any longer."

"True, very true. Filius, tell me honestly.....do you think Severus is alive?"

"No Albus, I'm assuming they killed him not soon after we left last night. It will be interesting to see how they spin the story of his 'escape'. Please tell me that you don't feel sorry for him Albus, please tell me that you're still not clinging to your sympathies for him. That's what brought you down last night, your faith in him."

"No I'm not Filius, I'm not feeling sorry for him.....I'm feeling sorry for Harry and his friends. They're learning what it is like to kill, and that's not a road ideally taken."

"Yet the whole point of the war is for Harry to kill Voldemort."

"We all do what we're destined to do don't we? Do you think he can do it?"

"Right now? No, I don't think he's ready yet. But he's getting there, and he is doing it much faster on his own than he ever did before. I think he's certainly willing, especially after last night."

"Will Voldemort wait that long though, that's the question."

"The one we're all asking I imagine. But he's short a major supporter now, two counting Magdalena. He might go back into planning again, which will give us some respite."

"If I was him, I'd attack Hogwarts as soon as possible."

"If that happens, could we defend the castle properly?"

"No."

The train made its way toward London and King's Cross Station, as many meetings were being held inside the various compartments. The 'running boys' as Blaise, Anthony, and Justin had taken to calling themselves, had taken a compartment for themselves along with Terry, and debated on what happened. The girls (Tracey, Daphne, Susan, Lisa, and Hannah) did as well, and the consensus of both groups was that Snape surely would have cracked under questioning and given up the other Death Eaters that he knew about. Speculation then turned to Draco Malfoy, and whether he'd actually taken the Dark Mark yet. Of course those two groups weren't the only ones debating these subjects, but they were the best informed of the ones who were.....except for, perhaps, Draco himself. What he thought was known only to himself, and to Crabbe and Goyle.....the three of them had locked themselves in a compartment and did not open the door to it during the length of the train ride, even when the snack cart came around.

Harry and the twins, hidden in dark cloaks, awaited the train's arrival, and watched with tired eyes as it pulled into Kings Cross. Charlie, Ginny, and Ron were off in Romania, doing the garbage disposal as planned, and getting Charlie a brief leave of absence to be with his family. Neville and Luna had gone home to Brighton and Ottery St. Catchpole respectively, though they would be back tomorrow for the funerals. Bill was finalizing the funeral arrangements. Harry and the twins were waiting for their friends, and were covertly watching for signs of the Aurors.....and the possible arrests of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, which they knew had to be coming. Harry had received word from Biller that morning about Edgecombe's confessions.....Biller had also cautioned him to make sure everyone had their stories straight about Snape's 'escape'.

The train began disgorging passengers, but not before four wizards in official looking robes entered the train. The four of them (one can assume there were more stationed outside the train) exited with no prisoners in tow. Of the students, the first of Harry's friends to be seen were the girls, who began to separate as they saw their parents. Harry, Fred, and George walked forward and lowered the hoods on their cloaks, Lisa was the first to notice, and she rushed over and

gave hugs to all three of them. She was joined soon by the other four girls, as the three young men were introduced to all of the parents.....all of whom had heard much about them both from letters from their daughters and from the papers. They accepted all the condolences with tight smiles, as Anthony and the others left the train and headed right for them. Soon there was a mass of twenty-some odd students and parents around Harry and the twins. Fred raised his voice slightly:

"The funerals will be held tomorrow at Farnum's in Diagon Alley, at 3:00 pm, there will be one service for our parents and for Remus. I know I speak for my entire family, and not just these two, when I say that all of you will be welcome." Anthony took Harry aside, and after introducing him to his parents, got what he really wanted to ask:

"How's Ginny? Why didn't she come with you?"

"Ginny and Ron are spending time with Charlie right now, they had to make a quick trip back to Romania....Charlie works with dragons there," he added for the benefit of Anthony's parents. After the obligatory 'dragons are real?' questions, Harry assured Anthony that Ginny wanted to see him the next day.

"She's taking it pretty hard mate, probably harder than the rest of us if I had to be honest. It would be good for her to be with you, the rest of us kind of lack perspective.....except maybe Neville and Luna."

"How are you Harry? Are you ok?"

"I'm dealing with it Anthony, I'm dealing with it. It's hard you know, getting used to people dying around you.....but Merlin help me I am getting used to it."

"Don't worry Harry, this can't go on forever.....soon you'll kill the bastard and the war will be over."

"Maybe, maybe. Use your skeleton portkey tomorrow, it'll make things a lot easier." They went back to the group, which slowly broke up as the families went home. The Goldsteins had the longest trip, as they were driving home to Sheffield. Justin lived in London, only a short

hop on the Underground away. Lisa and her parents were still chatting with Harry and the twins when Lisa all of the sudden went silent. Harry was confused for a brief moment, until he saw Hermione approaching, with her parents slightly behind her. The looks of disgust on the faces of Fred and George should have tipped him sooner he supposed.

"Harry, George, Fred, I'm very sorry about what happened. I liked your parents and Remus very much, I mourn them." Harry was the only one who felt like answering her at the moment, and he did so more for her parents benefit than hers.

"Thank you Hermione." She was taken aback a bit that he didn't say more, but she continued on with what appeared to be a set speech.

"I would like to attend the funerals tomorrow if it's ok." She clearly had overheard Fred's announcement. Harry was torn here, he honestly didn't care one way or the other whether she came to them or not.....but he knew that Ron and Ginny did care, a lot. He figured he should keep his tone polite though.

"You can do as you please Hermione, I certainly won't try to talk you out of it.....except to say one thing: stay away from Ginny and Ron. You're not their favorite person right now, and I can't guarantee what they might do if they saw you."

"Why not? I didn't have anything to do with what happened. This has go to stop sometime, I know they'll do what you say, and you seem to have at least dealt with it." Some of Harry's self control broke at hearing that, he was very sensitive to perceptions that he led his friends around by the nose.

"Damn you Hermione, I am not Voldemort! I do not control the emotions of other people, and I will not tell Ron and Ginny who they can despise and who they can't! They, and Fred and George, and Lisa, and anyone else in my circle are their own people, with their own minds. Proof positive is that Colin asked me ahead of time if I would have a problem with him taking you to the Ball, and I told him that he should ask out whoever he bloody well wanted to, he's his own man. I knew it would result in this conversation too, much as I

wanted to avoid it. Do you want a reminder of why Ron and Ginny loathe you more than ever right now? ‘I hate Snape too, but Dumbledore trusts him, you can’t seriously expect to send him to Azkaban.’ That’s what you said in my living room five months ago Hermione. Do you remember that?” Hermione looked as if she didn’t know what to say, and Harry no longer had any desire to let her off the hook.

“You backed the wrong horse here Hermione, and three people are dead because of Dumbledore and his curious trust issues, people that we loved. They were killed by Snape, who has been a Death Eater all this time, and was never on our side. We heard the confession you know, I was sitting not three meters from him when he spilled his guts.” Lisa’s parents, who had only just met Harry, were watching this byplay in fascination, as Harry was clearing holding back by the skin of his teeth from hexing Hermione. She had tears in her eyes as she tried to get out what she wanted to say.

“I did what I thought was right Harry, and I was wrong in that case. But I was not wrong in trusting Dumbledore, he just made a very bad mistake, and I agree it might not be forgivable, but....”

“Well, well, you actually admitted you were wrong. Fred, George, you should have brought the tape recorder.”

“We’ll figure out a way to video tape it out of a pensieve Harry; it will be our biggest seller.”

“Oh yeah, your idol Dumbledore is no longer head of the Order.”

“Who took it? Bill?” Hermione wasn’t in on the secrets, but she wasn’t stupid either. She had seen how often Bill had been at the DA meetings.

“Right in one, Bill Weasley is now in charge.....we might actually have a chance to win the war now, though that will be cold comfort to our friends who’ve lost their parents.” He was now tired of this discussion, and wanted it over. So did, apparently, Hermione, who asked a question that Harry had long wanted to hear from her:

"What would it take Harry? What would it take for things to be the way they were between us? I'm not saying I'll agree to everything, but I want to know."

"The week after Voldemort dies Hermione, I'll take you to lunch anywhere in England that you want, and we'll talk about it. Until then.....can you honestly tell me you're not happier now than you were with us? Leave the Weasleys and me aside for a moment, and think about that. You told Ron and me that you just wanted to get through Hogwarts unscathed, and so far so good. We haven't been that lucky of course, but that's life isn't it. We shared five years together Hermione, lots of adventures and lots of friendship. That's why I didn't let anyone hurt you, because I remember. After the war is over, a lot of things will change, and maybe you and I will be one of them."

Hermione was at a loss for words now, but had a somewhat thoughtful look on her face as she turned to go. Harry changed his mind about something, and had one more comment:

"Oh yeah.....come if you like tomorrow Hermione. I won't hex you or anything, and I honestly doubt Ron and Ginny will cause a scene by coming after you. Molly and Arthur were very fond of you, and would want you to be there."

"Thank you for that I guess, I'll see you tomorrow." She and her parents left the platform. Harry sighed, and ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

"Mr. and Mrs. Turpin, I'm sorry you had to see that. Hermione and I have a lot of history, not all of it good. She's not part of our circle anymore, and the split was rather....."

"Drawn out, is what Harry means to say."

"Thank you George.....something like that, yes. Another flap I'm going to have, trying to convince Ron and Ginny not to kill her on sight tomorrow." The Turpins looked surprised at hearing that, and Fred felt the need to clarify.

"What Harry's trying to say is that my brother and sister, who are generally lovely people most of the time.....well they're not the most forgiving sorts around. Add that to what happened to our parents, and Hermione's faith in Dumbledore.....don't worry though, we'll all talk to them, Bill will keep them in line if no one else can."

"Enough about them, would like to have dinner with us? Dobby and Winky, our house elves, are the best cooks around."

"Sure Harry, that would be great.....what do you mean by 'our' house elves?"

"Well technically they work for me, as free elves.....but it's kind of evolved to the point that Dobby and Winky do things for the three of us, as well as Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna. I guess you could say we're a cooperative venture in a way. The seven of us don't require much work done for us each individually, so they look after all of us in total.....if that makes any sense whatsoever." Lisa's parents at least pretended that they understood, and they all grabbed on to the portkeys that took them to Luna's house, where they collected the Lovegoods and walked to The Burrow for dinner. The three in Romania weren't back yet, but they all had a nice time, and many stories about Molly and Arthur were told.

Flashback:

Malfoy Manor

11:30 am

As soon as he heard about Snape being captured, Draco had had both eyes peeled for arresting Aurors. He knew that with Snape captured it was inevitable that he would be found out, and had prepared accordingly. Draco had a portkey prepared that would take him directly to Malfoy Manor, where there was a room under Fidelius that he and his two goons could hide in. When they were allowed to board the train, he knew that they either hadn't broken Snape (which he thought highly unlikely), or they were going to take them at Kings Cross. Whichever it was, he didn't want to take any chances. Not

long after the train left Hogsmeade, the three of them portkeyed out of the train compartment and into Draco's home, startling his mother.

"What happened Draco? Why aren't you on the train?"

"Snape killed those filthy Weasleys last night, and the werewolf too." Narcissa wasn't the shiniest apple in the barrel, and didn't immediately grasp what that meant.....and how Draco knew about it.

"So? Those are both good things right?"

"Mother, he was captured in the act." She certainly knew know, but held down the panic.

"How do you know all of this?"

"The old fool made the announcement at breakfast, and Zabini seemed to know all about it before he even said a word." Narcissa wasn't smart, but she did know how to follow instructions. She went over to her desk and scribbled a note and handed it to a house elf for delivery to one of the owls.

"That was to your aunt Bellatrix; we need to get out of here."

"We can hide in the hidden room; they'll never find us there."

"They can level the house around it, and then they'll find it. Your father's blatant activities have not made us especially loved in Auror Command right now, and I wouldn't put it past them to search a bit more thoroughly than in the past. We're going to floo into Hogsmeade and wait for your aunt, they'll never think to look for us there, and she'll take us to our Lord. You go pack a bag Draco, take whatever you think you'll need, we might not be coming back here. You two (pointing at Crabbe and Goyle), quickly floo home and do the same, be back here in ten minutes. If Snape confessed, then they know that you three have your Dark Marks, and every other damn thing about us." Crabbe and Goyle left, but Draco stayed behind.

"We still have a few hours mother, if they were going to wait until the train got to London to arrest us."

“They might come here to get me first, and it might be any minute. What do those two idiots know about your activities?”

“Most of it, but not everything.”

“Well let’s just hope we have ten minutes to spare then. Go now, get packed.” She did the same, which was easier because she’d been expecting something like this. The two goons returned soon after, and the four of them flooded right to the Hogshead Pub, where they waited about two hours before Bella met them and transported the lot of them to Riddle Manor. Narcissa and Draco went right to meet with Voldemort.

“So Snape is captured eh?”

“Yes my Lord, after killing the Weasley parents and Lupin.”

“Sloppy, very sloppy. I told him to question them, not to linger while doing it. Well he’s gone now, what a waste.”

“You’re not going to try to rescue him sir? I would have thought you’d be very pleased at that filth being put out of their misery.”

“Oh he’s dead by now I’m sure. They’ll know we can break him out of any prison they put him in, and Potter won’t want that risk. Besides, he hates Snape more than he hates me, it will give him some pleasure to do it. I don’t know if I’m happy about the deaths or not, it depends on what it does to Dumbledore. Wormtail!” Pettigrew rushed into the room.

“Yes Master?”

“Go check on Magdalena; find out if she’s been arrested yet. If not, bring her here.....but be careful, don’t risk getting caught.”

“Yes Master.” He left the room, checking on the only Ministry turncoat that Snape knew about.

“I assume you brought your two cronies with you?”

"Yes my Lord."

"That's fine; you four will stay here then until we determine whether there is an arrest warrant waiting for you. If not, that means they killed Snape before they questioned him. If so.....well we'll find out when Peter comes back from the Edgecombes".

"Will Dumbledore survive this Master?"

"I doubt he'll be leading the Order anymore, this is what Potter needs to push him out. As Headmaster? He'll probably hang on until the end of the year, they won't want to change horses in mid stream for the second year in a row. Draco, who will replace you at Hogwarts? Who'll be the leader now?"

"Probably Sean Touchet, though Zach Smith is getting more and more popular among my people as well."

"Touchet will be fine; I will have plans for him soon."

The rat came back after about fifteen minutes, looking a hair shaken.

"There are Aurors all over the place; they're searching the house right now. The daughter isn't back yet, but they're waiting for her from what I heard.....though not to arrest her."

"Did you ever try to recruit her Draco?"

"I made one approach to her, but she walked away before I finished my first sentence. She seemed scared, I guess the curse from last year really affected her."

"Oh well, no matter, she's useless without her mother anyway. Peter, soon after the brats go back to school, I want you to have a conversation with Percy Weasley; we need a new source inside the Ministry. I doubt he'll reconnect with his family over this, he might be ripe for the picking."

Monday, December 22, 1996

The Daily Prophet had little else in its edition that day other than news of the weekend's events. They managed to be tasteful (ish) when describing the deaths of Molly, Arthur, and Remus, relying heavily on an interview with Bill. They went into much more detail when dealing with the capture and subsequent escape of Severus Snape (Bill had used Fudge's own 'secret portkey hidden on Snape's person' story to great effect), and the arrest and confession of Magdalena Edgecombe. The Burrow had been flooded with owls from many, many people, the vast majority of whom expressed sympathy and extended offers of help. More than a couple of them also asked flat out for details of what happened.....details the family had no interest in sharing.

Farnum's Funeral and Burial Emporium

Diagon Alley, London

3:00 pm

The funerals were very well attended, being done at one time for security purposes. The entire Order was there, as were most of the longtime department heads from the Ministry. Many members of the quite large Weasley and Prewett families were in attendance, people that Harry had never met, and even Ron and Ginny seemed not to know most of them. Most of the executive council was there, along with their parents. Hermione did attend as well, coming in at the last moment with her parents. Harry's fears about Ron and Ginny were unfounded, as they barely sent a glance Hermione's way. Bill and Charlie greeted her politely though, and thanked the Grangers for coming. Harry went up to them and silently shook their hands, but didn't say anything (feeling that enough had been done on that score the day before). Bill asked Fudge if he would like to say a few words, but Fudge surprisingly declined, saying that today should not be about politics.

"How did Percy take the news of his demotion? I'm surprised to see him here." Percy had come with Fudge, but had studiously avoided his family since his arrival.

"I haven't told him yet Bill, I didn't think he would come if I had, and it's important for him to be here. I know that he seems sure about his attitudes, but I don't want him regretting this in the future." Bill was amazed at how thoughtful Fudge was being, and how wise. He was trying hard to reconcile this Fudge with the one he had heard about for years previous.

"Thank you for that, hopefully Percy will be grateful. If he ever apologizes, I'm sure most of us will take him back."

"I should tell you though Bill, last week Arthur and I finally had our chat about his future in the Ministry. He told me that he didn't want to leave his department; he liked it too much there. He said that with the kids about to be done with Hogwarts, the lack of money wasn't a big factor."

"I'm not surprised, he did enjoy his muggles, and he never did care much about money."

"I did prevail upon him to take the next available spot in the Wizengamot. One is opening up next month with Andrew Baroody retiring, and I was prepared to ensure that no one else went for it. He would have been very good for it I think." Bill's throat went dry, few knew that it was Arthur's secret, and probably only, ambition to be on the Wizengamot, though he had resisted going for it until the kids were out of the house.

"Thanks for telling me this Minister, I'll be sure to let the others know." Bill went back to his family, he would tell them later in private.

The bodies were set up for viewing in coffins, just like in muggle funerals. Indeed death was an area in which there was no substantial difference between wizard and muggle traditions, except that there were more family burial sites at private homes. Arthur and Molly were to be buried in a small plot outside The Burrow, next to Arthur's parents. No one knew what was to happen with Remus' body, as his family had disowned him years ago. Harry assumed he would bring the body to The Burrow and find someplace there. The seven Weasley children were sitting in the family pew in front, along with Harry, who while feeling vaguely hypocritical considering how

somewhat topsy-turvy his relationship with him had been, was representing Remus' family.

Another small difference between wizard and muggle funerals is that in wizard funerals there was no main eulogy, just a series of comments and remembrances. The tradition was that people would stand up where they were and start speaking. The testimonials lasted for about an hour, as some of the Weasley and Prewett family members told stories from childhood, and many Hogwarts alumni reminisced about all three. Noticeably quiet was Dumbledore, who felt that anything he said would be taken with hostility and thus kept his mouth shut.

Among the highlights:

"Arthur Weasley was my boss for fifteen years, and I wouldn't have had it any other way. He made work a joy to come into; it won't be the same without him, or nearly as good." Thomas Perkins, Warlock, from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were the two kindest people I've ever met, I'll miss seeing them smile and hearing them laugh." Neville Longbottom.

"Remus Lupin was the best teacher I've ever had, for any subject, and by far the most understand. We're all the poorer for his passing." Terry Boot.

"I'm sure Mum and Dad would be happy to see all the people here, and be honored that so many of you cared about them. Just think of the mental hug that Mum is giving you right now and the hearty handshake from Dad." Charlie Weasley.

"The three true Marauders are now together again: Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs.....may they make God laugh." Harry Potter.

As the crowd left, Bill, Charlie, and Harry lingered behind to take care of the coffins for transport back to The Burrow. They were interrupted by Travis Biller, who they had noticed in the back row of the room.

"Harry, are you up to a little trip this afternoon, there's something I want to show you." The three of them looked curiously at him.

"Where do you want to go? We have to take care of this before I do anything."

"I know, and that's part of it. I thought you might like Remus to be buried with your parents in Godric's Hollow." Harry was rarely caught off guard anymore, but this did it. Remus had not gotten around to telling where his parents were buried, and figured that there was going to be another blackmailing Dumbledore session in his future to find out.

"You know where they are?"

"I do, Remus told me a couple of weeks ago, and he wanted to arrange Auror support for when you two went there."

"Ok, let's go then."

"Before we do: we attempted to arrest Draco Malfoy, Narcissa Malfoy, and Draco's two goons yesterday, but none of them were where we thought they'd be. The kids got on the train, but weren't onboard when the train reached King's Cross. We then went to Malfoy Manor, but the woman had cleared out as well. I'm assuming that they took refuge with her sister and Voldemort." The three of them nodded, this wasn't too surprisingly, though they appreciated the heads up. "Bill, Charlie, best that he comes alone for now.....some things are best done alone." Bill and Charlie nodded.

"Dinner's at six Harry, try not to be late, Anthony and his parents are coming over."

"Thanks Bill, I'll be back soon." Bill shrunk Remus' coffin and put it in his pocket. They left the room and met up with Rob Graham and Sarah Westbrook, Bill's regular team. They took a portkey out of there, causing a few murmurings from those who were still there, seeing Harry leaving with three Aurors. Bill assured everyone that Harry was fine; he just had to do an errand.

They arrived in a wooded area around a small house. The cemetery was in the backyard, and was filled with Potters going back centuries. Harry asked something that had been bothering him for some time:

"Who owns all this now? Gringotts didn't mention any property that I own, so it can't be me."

"From what I gather, it was in your parents' will that the property would only go to you on your 17th birthday, and not before. It's been under Fidelius since your parents started hiding here, with Dumbledore being the secret keeper after the traitor let them be killed. He lifted the spell last month, but there's been no sign of activity since then, and we've had people here around the clock."

Harry walked over to where his parents lay, it was easy to spot, as there was an open hole next to it, thoughtfully dug by some the Aurors who had been on duty the last two days. He knelt by his parents tombstones and the tears finally started to flow, as he cried hard for the first time in months. He tried hard to say something, anything, to the people who had given him life. He thought, as he often did, about the only time he could remember seeing their faces: coming out of Voldemort's wand two years ago. He remembered their help that night, it was a big reason he was still alive right now. After about five minutes the tears dried up, and he stood.

"Where is Sirius buried? I don't see a grave for him."

"We only bury people when there's a body Harry, and Sirius' body was never recovered. I'm sorry." He took the coffin out of his pocket and placed it in the middle of hole, unshrinking after he did. He grabbed one of the shovels lying against a tree and started filling in the hole. Harry looked at him in surprise, and Travis seemed to know what he was thinking.

"We don't do everything with magic Harry; some things are best done with your hands." Harry took another shovel and helped him. When they were done, Travis conjured up a couple of water bottles, and handed one to Harry.

“Melissa Bliss was part of my crew for a couple of years; she says you have a lot of skills in Defense.”

“She’s a great teacher, I’m sure she must have been a good Auror.”

“She was, but she couldn’t stand the political interference. She speaks fluent French, so when Beauxbatons had the Defense job open up, she went right for it.”

“How do you put up with the political interference?”

“I don’t usually, I just ignore it and do what I want. My record is so good that Bones and Fudge just leave me alone to do what I want. Now tell me, what did you do with Snape? Now I know you guys killed him, just tell me that you took care of the body.”

“Two words: dragon dung.” Biller snickered at hearing that, and patted Harry on the back.

“Very thorough I must say. What are you prepared to tell Dumbledore?”

“Nothing more than what the Prophet had in it, I don’t dare.” Travis seemed satisfied with that answer, and changed the subject.

“Look, Melissa has asked me to give you hand in your defense lessons. There are some spells and tactics she wants you to be taught that she’s not comfortable with showing you herself.”

“You’ll come teach me? At the castle?”

“I will, one day a week like she’s been doing. I’ll sometimes bring Rob and Sarah with me, and we can practice team things, like what you did during the trial with your friends.”

“Speaking of whom, can I tell them about this? I didn’t tell them about Professor Bliss’ lessons since she asked me not to.”

“You can tell them, but I want to do your lessons with just you for the time being. It will go much faster if I’m just teaching you. You can

pass along whatever you want to your friends and allies though, as long as you think they can handle it.”

“Fair enough, and thank you Travis, I appreciate what you’ve done for me today.”

“No problem, I have very fond memories of all the Marauders, I’m sure they’re somewhere up there causing God all sorts of problems.” They both smiled at that, as did Rob and Sarah, who had quietly walked up behind them, startling Harry.

“That’s one thing I would like to learn, how to move that quietly.”

“We’ll do it the first lesson, now we’d better be heading back, you don’t want to be late for dinner. There’s one last thing we need to do first though.” He waved his wand and muttered some words, he then pointed the wand at Harry and before the lad could react, a light washed over him. While it settled, Sarah whispered something in his ear, and comprehension dawned on him.

“I will keep this secret.” With that, the light vanished, and Godric’s Hollow was back under Fidelius.

Tuesday, December 23, 1996

Gringotts Bank, Diagon Alley, London

9:00 am

As he walked into Fortrap’s office, Harry reflected that he hated wills, even though the only two he had been a beneficiary of had made him rich. He found something distasteful about sitting around a desk waiting to find out what ‘prize’ you got for someone dying. He knew in his heart that he was wrong, but the bitterness in him just wouldn’t go away. Even two days plus later, he was still having private doubts about what he had done, and what he had allowed to be done. He had found that killing Snape was very cathartic in one sense, but he loathed what he might become if he enjoyed it too much. Perversely, the person in the world Harry most wanted to have a conversation with right now was Voldemort....he wanted to know how he got

started, and why. He knew such a conversation would never take place now, and even if it did there was no way he would get the truth. He was jolted from his musings by Fortrap was entering the room behind him and was clearing his throat. Harry looked around the room and saw his family: all the Weasleys (minus Percy), along with Neville (and surprisingly, his grandmother), Luna, Ashley, Lee, and Peter Tyson.

"Well let's get started everyone. I would like to say how sorry I am that we have to be here. I don't interact with humans all that much outside of work, but through Bill I have had the pleasure of meeting Molly and Arthur on a few occasions and I too mourn their loss. We will begin with their will first, which was modified a little over a month ago. They seemed to know that they would die together it seems." He took out a piece of parchment and began to read:

This is the last will and testament of Arthur and Molly Weasley, and we make these bequests being of sound mind and body. If either of us survives the other, then all possessions will go to the surviving spouse, but we don't think that's going to happen. We believe in this war, and we are fighting in it for the right reasons and for the right side. As of the writing of this will, our son Percival has continued to repudiate our family, and while we still love him, will not receive any bequests. To our other children, we love you very much, and you have given us so much joy and happiness. We may have been poor for a long time, but we've been very rich in love and we thank you for that.

Our home, The Burrow, we leave to our eldest sons William and Charles jointly, with the proviso that our children Ronald, Ginevra, and our surrogate son Harry Potter, be given free residence there until their 18th birthdays.....though they must do chores of course.

All of the items in our shed or anything else muggle in nature, will go to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, owned by Frederick, George, and Harry. Hopefully these odds and ends will be of use to you. We are so proud of you Fred and George, you have made your own way on your own terms, and thankfully you didn't listen to us when we told you the business was a bad idea. Harry, thank you again for helping

them with their dream. The shed includes the enchanted car, so if it ever turns up, you three know what to do.

As of today our Gringotts balance is 15,300 galleons, which are to be split evenly between William, Charles, Frederick, George, Ronald, and Ginevra. The Hogwarts expenses for Ronald and Ginevra have already been taken care of by Harry, so you two won't have to worry about school at all.

Fortrap paused as all eyes in the room went to Harry, who had his head in his hands. He looked up at their quizzical faces.

"They wouldn't let me give them anything else, I had to beg them to let me do that much."

"Mr. Potter is correct, he has set up a trust fund that now contains the balance of one more year at Hogwarts for Ronald, and two more for Ginevra, your parents had that many galleons in their vault because Mr. Potter paid for this year's schooling.....and I agree with him that it took no small amount of persuading on his part to get your parents to agree to it." Ron went quietly over to Harry and hugged him, after which Ginny did the same.

"Thank you Harry, you didn't have to do it, but thank you." Fortrap cleared his throat again and resumed reading.

Custody of our minor children, Ronald and Ginevra shall revert to William, until such time as their 17th birthdays. Look after them Bill, and after Harry too. The three of them have been forced to grow up too fast in many ways, please keep in mind that they are still children in so many ways.

We love you all, may you all live long and happy lives.

Fortrap stopped reading and decided to give his audience a chance to collect themselves. Most of them were all cried out from the weekend, though Ginny had some tears collecting in her eyes.

"Shall I continue with Remus Lupin's? We can do this later if you would like some time." Most goblins were notoriously unsympathetic

to human frailties and grieving, but Fortrap was very fond of Bill Weasley, and had heard countless stories about his family from him. Of those in the room he had only met (besides Bill) Ron, George and Fred one time apiece, but he felt that he knew them pretty well from Bill's stories. Bill stood up and started pacing:

"No Fortrap, go ahead." Seeing most of the others nod in agreement, Fortrap took out another sheet of parchment.

This is the solemn Will and Testament of Remus J. Lupin. All of you here know how I feel about you, so I will spare you any last words. Please don't cry over me, I led an interesting life, and I'm sure my death was in the same spirit.

I leave the sum of 500,000 galleons in a trust fund that will go to supplying Wolfsbane Potion to any all werewolves who need it.....on the condition that twice a year they undergo questioning under Veritaserum to prove that they have not gone Dark, or willingly harmed any humans. I would like Peter Tyson and Harry Potter to be the overseers of this Trust, if they will so honor me.

I leave the further sum of 300,000 galleons in a trust fund to provide 24 hour/7 days a week nursing and medical care for Frank and Alice Longbottom, so that they may leave St. Mungos and return home. I would like Neville Longbottom and Nora Longbottom to act as trustees. Neville, I valued your parents very highly, they were my very dear friends. When your parents have passed on, I have no doubt that you will find a worthy charity to use the money on.

My house at Number 12 Grimmauld Place and all its contents I leave to Harry Potter and Ron Weasley.

The remainder of the cash in my estate I divide up into equal shares, and give them to: Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Fred Weasley, George Weasley, Charlie Weasley, Bill Weasley, Lee Jordan, Neville Longbottom, and Luna Lovegood.

Fortrap stopped reading, and apparently that was all there was in the will.

“Currently each share of cash is worth 21,300 galleons. Those of you with vaults will have it deposited this afternoon, those of you without vaults can elect to have the money put in your guardians’ vaults, or open ones for yourselves. Miss Weasley, Mr. Ron Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Lovegood, what would you like to do?” They all told him that they would like to open their own vaults. Ron, as the eldest Weasley without a vault, was given the family one, as Bill and Charlie elected not to change. They all filed out of Fortrap’s office after signing the paperwork, but Harry lingered behind.

“Fortrap, I would like you to put my cash share of Remus’ will into the Weasleys Hogwarts Fund, and adjust the terms to include any child from the Weasleys who were here today. It will be at least 12 years before someone will need that part of it, so it should accrue nicely.”

“Very well Harry, that’s a good idea. I had a meeting with your business partners last week, I was very impressed. This muggle entertainment niche could be worth quite a lot, especially given that you three aren’t planning on borrowing to finance the initial orders. I should tell you that I’ve been hearing rumblings that Zonkos is interested in either buying you three out, or starting some kind of partnership. This was before news broke of the parents death, so that’s probably why nothing more has been heard of it.”

“I’ll mention it to Fred and George, but I seriously doubt that they’re interested in being bought out.”

“Fair enough, if the Zonkos people approach us formally we’ll be sure to inform you immediately. The arrangements for the two trusts in Lupin’s will should be ready by the New Year. I take it that the werewolf trust was news to you?”

“It’s very much Remus, and very wise too....but I wasn’t expecting something like it, no. Tell me Fortrap, do the goblins have a preference in this war?”

“We are not about to get involved in fighting of any kind Harry, but naturally we feel there is more money to be made in peacetime. I would say on the whole that the goblins are more sympathetic to your side than Voldemorts’, given his views about other magical species.”

“Were the goblins neutral during the last war?”

“Hogwarts really must replace your History teacher.....is he really a ghost by the way? (Seeing Harry nod, he continued, shaking his head at the folly of wizards) Yes Harry, we were neutral, in fact neither side especially wanted us as allies. The Ministry and Voldemort both only wanted humans to fight, fearing what we might gain if we were on the winning side.”

“That sounds pretty short sighted if you ask me.” Fortrap laughed at this, startling Harry a bit.

“Muggle born and raised wizards often take that attitude, they’re so amazed that there are such things as goblins that they don’t bother to hate us or look down upon us. The same is true of House Elves.....I’ve noticed how you and your Elf treat each other, he’s in here quite a bit doing business for you and for the twins. Rumor has it your former friend Granger was going about trying to liberate all of them.”

“Yes she was, though I don’t know if she’s doing anything with it now. Do you employ any here?”

“A few, just to help with maintenance. Over 80 of our staff is goblin only, and we only hire the smartest wizards, such as Bill and his fiancée Ashley. Well anyway Harry, I fear I must get back to work. I always enjoy our conversations though I must tell you. It’s a pleasure talking to a human who doesn’t work for me, wants to borrow money from me, or looks at me with fear. It’s a rare thing. Let’s set up an appointment some time a week from Friday to talk about the Werewolf trust. I’ll send an owl to Mr. Tyson and find out what time works best for his schedule.”

“Sounds good, I don’t go back to school until the next morning.”

“Will you have a new Headmaster by then I wonder?”

“You and me both Fortrap, you and me both. Have a good day.”

"You too Harry."

Harry left the office and found his friends waiting for him in the lobby. Bill and Ashley had gone back to work, as had Peter and the twins, so it was just the kids (Neville's grandmother had wandered off toward Madame Malkin's). They walked out of the bank, heading for Florean Fortescues. Harry fell back to have some words with Ron.

"Ron, what do you want to do about Grimmauld Place? Should we keep it? Sell it?"

"I don't know Harry.....I don't know if I can see myself living in a house full of bad memories like that one has. I can see 'staying' there, but I don't know about living there. I'm pretty surprised Remus left me a part of it too. What about you? I know you must have thought about it, we all expected you to get the house in Sirius' will back in July.

"I'm torn too Ron.....on the one hand it's a pleasant reminder of both Sirius and Remus, on the other hand I don't know if I can go into that kitchen and not see your parents there. How bout we do this: Let see how things sort out until summer, then we can decide for sure then. Bill needs the place anyway for Order meetings and such; I know he doesn't want to use The Burrow if he doesn't have to."

"Sounds good Harry, this is a decision that we can put off easily enough, yeah. Maybe everything will be over by then, who knows." The teens went off to do their last bit of Christmas shopping before heading back home.

Thursday, December 25th, 1996

The Burrow

Christmas was a naturally subdued affair this year, for obvious reasons. The house seemed much emptier without Molly cooking and Arthur putting around. There were only eight of them there, plus Dobby and Winky. Lee and Neville were celebrating Christmas with their extended families, and Luna was spending a quiet day with her father, they would be coming over for breakfast the next morning. Ashley and Harry were the only humans there without red hair,

Ashley had written her parents, telling them of the weekend's events and saying that she wanted to be there for Bill.

Everyone slept late, and the last one down (Ron, as usual), didn't wake up until almost noon. Everyone was still in their pajamas, and Dobby and Winky were given the day off as Harry and Ashley made pancakes in the kitchen. When there was a huge stack ready, plus tons of syrup and fruit (have to keep them healthy), they brought it into the living room, where everyone was watching Christmas cartoon videos on the newly installed television, a projection screen model that Harry had bought for Bill and Ashley as their Christmas present; they had told him that they were going to make The Burrow their home, though Arthur and Molly's room would only be used as a last resort when too many of the next generation of Weasleys filled the house. As they ate their pancakes and drank their Coke (which Harry had gotten them all addicted to), they opened their presents. Some of the presents included:

Ron got an autographed Chudley Cannons robe set from Harry.

Everyone got a compact disc player (boombox) and a gift certificate for some discs from Harry and the twins.

Ashley got a few medium sized packages of WWW goods from Ron and Ginny, to send to her family in America.

Dobby and Winky each got a complete children's wardrobe as a gift from all the trunk holders.

Charlie and Bill, in addition to their electronic gifts, received their own seven compartment trunks from Harry, which now put them into the trunk system (Anthony Hook had assured Harry that the distance from Britain to Romania didn't matter to the trunk floo system). He hadn't told anyone he was doing this, and was thanked not only by Charlie and Bill, but by all the others, since that meant everyone could see so much more of Charlie.

Harry, against his better judgment, bought the twins a Playstation and some games.

Once all the presents were opened, Bill raised his Coke bottle for toast.

"To family, to loved ones.....and to those we've lost. May we all have the sense to value them all forever." Ten bottles clinked together. Amen.

Author's Note: As of this writing, I have not read Quidditch Through the Ages yet. I keep meaning to, but never think of it when I'm in a bookstore. So let me just apologize for the gross liberties I'm taking with the professional sport as it's probably written about in that book, as far as salaries, games, length of seasons, etc. Just think of it as my own ideal Quidditch league. Plus, if you'll forgive me, some of the Quidditch stuff I've read on the Lexicon (which comes from QTTA I'm guessing) doesn't make sense. I mean 13 teams, all presumably with a reserve team? That's 182 players, supplied by a school that graduates only 40 students a year, most of them not being Quidditch players. So to combat that logical lunacy, I've made some facts up, please forgive me. Can you tell I'm a sports nut? This will of course have no real impact on the main plotline of Final Straw (you know, that war thing), it's just something I felt like adding in to amuse myself.

The big events talked about later in the chapter are very cliché I know, and quite a lot of stories do them.....but you know me, I'll figure out a way to make them interesting enough for me to write and for you to read, don't worry.

Friday, December 26th, 1996

Luna and her father arrived for breakfast early that morning, finding a crew of yawning Weasleys and a not much more awake Neville. Winky was making her famous omelets this morning and they had a relatively quick meal, so that Joseph, Bill, Ashley, and the twins could get to work. Harry and Luna privately exchanged their presents (they wanted to be there when the other opened it). Harry had gotten Luna a nice bracelet and a cashmere sweater that he had noticed her eyeing back in August. She gave him a scrapbook that included some of the more 'interesting' articles that The Quibbler had published over the years, including everything about Harry himself, as well as Stubby Boardman and Fudge (she could always get Harry laughing when she mentioned goblin pies). This wasn't something done to be cheap, Harry had taken an interest in The Quibbler over the months, and had taken up her father's offer to spend a day at the paper, which was going to happen the next week sometime. Harry gathered the other teens in the living room after everyone had gone to work (except Charlie, who was there until Sunday). Ron first had something on his mind.

"It's after Christmas now, and I think its time we allowed some more people into the trunk system, or at least to know about it." Harry had known for awhile that this was coming, and had been trying to come up with good reasons to try and thwart it.

"I gather you're referring to Susan, Tracey, and Anthony?"

"I am, I think all three of them have proven that they can be trusted."

"Yes they have, I will admit that. I'm guessing that you want some quality time with Susan in your trunk?"

"I want the same thing you have with Luna. I know Susan would need to use Luna's trunk to get to mine, and that's why I haven't just done it on my own. Tracey would be the same way. Anthony could use any of ours.....and as much as that particular idea makes me uncomfortable, I'm no hypocrite." Ginny had been staring at him while he said this, more impressed than anything else.

"Neville, Ginny, what do you think?"

"I have to agree with Ron."

"Me too Harry, I mean I imagine that Alicia and Angelina know about the floo system, so it's not like the twins haven't blabbed."

"One, no they haven't blabbed, I've made sure that Alicia and Angelina have been Obliviated after each time they used the floo (there were three sets of wide eyes at hearing that). Two: those two aren't students at Hogwarts and have nothing to gain by tattling on us to Dumbledore, as unlikely as it would be that the three people in question would do so. So while I take your point about Luna and me, I don't agree that it's the same thing with the twins' girlfriends." He sighed, all the while fighting an irrational urge to just take the trunks back.

"Fine.....as soon as we get Bill to create another parchment for the three of them to sign.....and we can include Lisa, Terry, Justin, Blaise, and Daphne as well, and maybe Katie and Hannah. We might

as well have our entire core involved if we're going to add those three."

"The other parchment seems to have worked pretty well; no one has tried to squeal on us yet."

"Ginny, it's only a matter of time before Colin tries to let something slip to Hermione, she's got to be curious about what we're doing. In fact I wouldn't put it past him to try and get us to admit her to the Executive Council."

"Please tell me you're not going to go along with that."

"Not bloody likely Ron, that girl will never set foot in Dungeon Seven as long as I'm alive. Colin will just have to pray that he can satisfy her in other ways. Now is what I said about the trunks acceptable?" Ginny, Ron, and Neville all nodded their heads, relieved that Harry seemed to be giving in so easily. Neville alone seemed to remember his manners:

"Luna, is it ok if Tracey and Susan use your trunk as the go-between?" Ron looked faintly ashamed as he was quick to echo this.

"Yeah Luna, I'm sorry, we should have asked you first."

"That's ok you two, they can use it whenever they like.....once they sign the parchment." Luna didn't much like the idea of sharing the floo system either, for much the same reason as Harry: lack of trust. She only really trusted the others here in the room, but had to acknowledge that others might feel differently. Luna's rationale for this boiled down to two words: Peter Pettigrew. More than anyone of the other four she had taken the moral of Pettigrew to heart, and what it had meant to Harry. Still, she too didn't want to appear to be a hypocrite.

The five of them continued on with another Occlumency lesson, a hands on one this time, as Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday had just been dealing with the written material. Neville was having the easiest time understanding the theory, and Ron the hardest. Ron was doing much better in school, but he still was no genius. Ginny also

wasn't picking up the theory very quickly, and Harry was privately wondering if Bill and Percy were the exceptions rather than rule academically among their siblings. After an hour of practical lessons he sent Hedwig off to Peter Tyson requesting a week's worth of appointments for Ron and Ginny, at whatever charge Peter deemed appropriate.....he felt that he could get Neville squared away himself.

Ron and Ginny went to WWW to do some work, the twins needing help with the after Christmas crowd and Lee still being with his family. Neville's grandmother was having company over and he had no interest in going home anytime soon. So the four of them (Charlie was coming along for the day) headed to Diagon Alley to do something Harry had been meaning to do for quite awhile now: pensieve shopping. Harry had wanted one ever since he saw his own memories in Madam Bones' pensieve. This was also something that he was only going to buy for himself. He had made a mental vow that the spigot was going to be turned off now that the others had some money, from Remus' will. Two days before, at the ice cream parlor, they had thrown out ideas on what to do with their inheritances.

"I might take a few years and go to a muggle university, see how they live and stuff." From Ginny.

"This will allow me to do some advanced Herbology work after we graduate, so I can be groomed to take Sprout's place eventually." Neville.

"I need to find my own business to start, like the twins did. I just need to think of a good idea." Ron.

"I don't know really, maybe I'll do some traveling before I go to work for The Quibbler." Luna.

Harry hadn't told them what he'd already done with his inheritance, and had no intention of doing so anytime soon (except Luna). He figured he had a minimum of twelve years to break the news to the first Weasley parent of this generation. The last thing he wanted was uncomfortable looks from Ron and Ginny.....even though he knew the family needed the trust fund, given the procreative habits of past Weasley males.

"I'll probably put some more money into WWW, there's a large untapped market for our stuff in America, Australia, all over the place." Harry rationalized that he didn't need to tell them 'which' money he would be putting into the business.

Harry, Neville, Charlie, and Luna took a portkey into Diagon Alley from Luna's house; they didn't want to leave any trails for people to follow. They decided to go into Knockturn Alley to get the pensieve, as that would hopefully give them a better level of discretion.....they didn't want Dumbledore knowing that Harry had one of these.....or did they?

Charlie for one thought it was the perfect way to see just how obsessed Dumbledore was, if Harry was willing to wait a little while to put anything important in it.

"Think about it Harry, it will be a great test of the trunk system and its security features. Just load your trunk with booby traps and alarm charms, and wait for the fireworks." Neville looked skeptical.

"You really think he'll be dumb enough to try something like that? He has to know that his next wrong move will probably be his last, the guy just can't afford to get caught doing anything." Charlie had an easy answer for that, this was clearly something he'd been thinking a lot about.

"Well technically he wouldn't be doing anything illegal by searching Harry's trunk, since Hogwarts bylaws do allow it if there's enough probable cause. No, you wouldn't do this to try and get him into trouble at all; you'd just be trying to see how closely he's watching you, and how far he'll go to spy on you. Call it a test of the new and humbled Dumbledore." It was hard to argue the logic of that, and Harry didn't bother trying.

"That's a great idea Charlie, I like it. Now all we need to do is walk around in the open for awhile and attract some attention. That will bring Tonks running to follow us, and she'll report my purchase to the old man. Let's go get some ice cream and lounge around." After calling for Dobby and sending him on a quick errand, the four of them

went to Florean Fortescue's, and sat outside in the magically heated patio with their sundaes. Sure enough, this attracted some attention as people stopped to gawk. The presence of the other three dissuaded most from actually coming up to him, but a few people nervously asked for autographs. To the others' surprise, Harry gave them to whomever asked, and soon there was a line formed. After about 30 minutes Harry privately thought that Tonks must be around somewhere, or else she wasn't going to show at all.....besides, his right hand was beginning to ache a little bit from all the writing. He said his goodbyes to the crowd, and as they moved off, Harry made a point to walk next to Charlie.

"I hated every second of that I'll have you know, if this doesn't work I'm taking the trunk back you git." Charlie started snickering at hearing that, but knew not to take it seriously. He knew that Harry had been a little freer with his fame in the last few months to get what he wanted.....and this fit that, the key thing being not to let people know that they had been manipulated. Watching the crowd though, he was very glad that Bill was around to keep Harry grounded, as a little idol worship could go a long way.

The four of them walked around a little bit longer, then headed for Swearengen's Magical Objects Shoppe, the best place to find pensieves in Diagon Alley.....they decided to forgo Knockturn Alley, as there were still a few people watching them, though they couldn't quite pick out Tonks yet. They entered the store and were greeted by a man with black hair and a dark beard, in his late 50's it seemed; he was the owner of the shop, Al Swearengen.

"Hello there folks.....ahh Mr. Potter, you look just like your photographs in The Daily Prophet. What can I do for you?"

"I would like to buy a pensieve if possible." Swearengen looked at Harry's friends.

"They're not that heavy you know, doesn't need four people." He smiled when he said this, making it a joke.

"The redhead here is my bodyguard, the other guy is my butler, and the girl is my masseuse." He was rewarded for that with three smacks

on the back of his head. “Ouch, jeez, some people can’t take a joke. No really, they’re my friends, and to make sure my sometimes greedy self doesn’t spend too much money in one place.”

Swearengen just shook his head and laughed, this wasn’t the Harry Potter he’d read about in the papers. Before he could say anything, a middle aged woman came into the shop and started nosing around the dark detectors. She didn’t seem to need any help, so he ignored her for the time being.

“Well come over here then, have a look at them. The main difference among them is their carrying capacity; they go from ten hours worth of storage, to one thousand, and a few points in between. Now you being as young as you are, I would not recommend the thousand hour model, as much as I would like to sell you one.”

“How about one hundred hours to start with, how much would that cost me?” Swearengen picked up a cobalt blue model and hefted it into Harry’s hands.

“This baby will run you seven hundred galleons.”

“How destructible are they? If I drop it will it break?”

“Only if you drop it from Astronomy Tower, and even then it should just crack it, which can be fixed.....though you’d lose some of the memories inside of it.”

“Cool, I’ll take it.” No need for Dobby’s services today, he had prepared for this and handed over seven Gringotts’ bank drafts for one hundred galleons each (he was prepared to spend one thousand). He nodded at Neville, who went over to look at foeglasses, and accidentally tripped and stumbled into the other customer.

“I’m so sorry ma’am, I’m just very clumsy at times, please excuse me.”

“Not a problem young man just be more careful.”

"Yes ma'am."

Swearengen wrapped the pensieve in some cheesecloth, and the four of them left the store and headed back to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry murmured to Neville:

"Did you place it?"

"No sweat, it's on her."

They took a portkey back to Luna's house, and quickly took out the Marauders Map that Charlie was carrying in his pocket. Sure enough, five minutes later, a dot joined Albus Dumbledore in his office.....and above it the dot had the name Nymphadora Tonks. Harry slapped Neville on the back and hugged Luna.

"Well brother Charlie, you were absolutely right.....I'm going to have some fun with this."

Tuesday, December 30, 1996

The Quibbler offices, Diagon Alley, London

10:00 am

The Quibbler was in essence a six person operation, most of the time. Luna's father, Joe, was the editor and publisher of course, and wrote quite a few articles himself under various pen names. There was also Rita Skeeter, the chief reporter and gossip columnist. Aaron Rodgers was the press operator and ad salesman.....an odd combination to be sure, but as The Quibbler was only a monthly paper, it didn't need someone full time to run the presses. David Willis was the photographer and layout designer, responsible for the look of the publication. Jane Fellowes assisted all of them with the day to day things, being the kind of office assistant/gofer/troubleshooter all in one person. Nigel Havers was the business and circulation manager and ran the office so that Joe could devote his time to his writing. Luna herself occasionally contributed articles to the paper as well, and had confessed to Harry that in a way she missed being able to

go to a muggle school and really exercise her talent for creative writing.

Creative writing, which was what Joe Lovegood considered to be his chief talent. As Harry sat in his office, Joe told him about his main reason for The Quibbler.

“For some reason a lot of wizards frown on reading fiction Harry, they consider it too muggle to be bothered with. That’s what I try to give people with The Quibbler, their own paper full of interesting stories that are just a bit too odd to be real. Of course most of our stuff is total nonsense.....but it is well written, engaging nonsense, and that’s why we’ve sustained a niche. Think of the muggle television show The X-Files, it’s the same thing.”

“So you make most of the stories up?”

“Well what we do is take a nugget of truth.....or what someone believes to be the truth, and we expand on it, embellish it. We don’t lie really; we just give the truth ‘scope’. Most of our readership understands this, and just enjoys the humor. Of course we have a few readers who take us deadly serious.....but for the most part they’re harmless, and contribute some rather amusing letters to the editor.”

“Where did you get the whole Stubby Boardman thing?” That was Harry’s personal favorite among the stories, since it reminded him fondly of Sirius.

“There actually was some dim woman who believed it happened to her, and when she couldn’t get The Daily Prophet to bite, she came here. I didn’t believe a word of it naturally, but it played really well on the page, so we went with it. Remus once told me that Sirius thought it was hilarious, so I’m glad we made it a running story. We always sold a lot of papers when we ran a Stubby Boardman story, though we didn’t go the well too often.”

“What about the goblin pies?” As soon as he asked it, Harry and Luna started giggling uncontrollably. The new Fudge had really grown on Harry, but the mental image of the old Fudge grinning while pulling a

pie out of the oven just put him into fits every time. Joe just looked at them with a benign smile, of pride of authorship as they calmed down after a minute.

"I just did that to start some trouble with that buffoon. Fudge had made some nasty comments about us on the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network), and I wanted to yank his chain a little bit. The goblins didn't seem to mind the stories at least, I'm sure they read them since they seem to know everything that goes on everywhere." Harry had to agree with that, certainly Fortrap knew every move he made outside of Hogwarts.....not that he viewed that as a bad thing necessarily.

"What about now? How is the new and improved Fudge getting along with The Quibbler?"

"Well he at least acknowledges us in a positive way, like at the Black press conference.....but I think he's just trying to stay on your good side in that regard."

"If only he knew that I have no control over what you print and what you don't.....still there's no harm in him 'thinking' that, as long as it suits your purposes and mine."

"No there isn't, now how about that tour I promised you?"

"Sure thing, let's go."

The three of them walked downstairs and the two Lovegoods showed Harry the press room first, which to someone who's never seen one is always a curious sight. He poked around a bit and was fascinated by all the mechanics in it. Joe told him that little in the wizarding world required such specific mechanics, and that the presses at The Daily Prophet, where he had worked before starting up The Quibbler, were even more intricate and advanced.....a necessity, given that it was a daily paper, whereas his was just a monthly.

"What led you to start The Quibbler?"

"I got tired of being a stenographer Harry, and reporting on boring Wizengamot meetings or Quidditch games. There just wasn't enough to keep my interest going. Plus, being a daily paper, you had to file something every day. There just wasn't enough time to 'write', and that's what I really wanted to do. I've often thought of trying to write a muggle spy novel, and maybe I will when my girl here takes over. But anyway, the war had just finished, a beautiful daughter had just been born (Luna hugged her dad), and I was bored. Luna's mother made a good living at the Ministry, so we decided to take a chance. One of my cousins loaned me the startup money, and we published the first issue a couple of months before Luna's first birthday. The March issue will be our fifteenth anniversary, and I'm sure I'll do something to commemorate it."

They walked into the main office area, and Harry was greeted by the other employees, as they knew him from stopping in during the summer, though he had never stayed as long as he did now. Rita came up to him and immediately went for the throat:

"So Harry, is there any chance of you expanding your Diagon Alley empire? Negotiating with Joe are you?" She was smiling when she said this, which took some of the seriousness out of it, but not all.

"Not at the moment Rita, I don't have the million galleons it would take to pay Joe what The Quibbler is worth to him." He did have a million galleons, but the look of pride on Joe's and Luna's faces was worth a lot more than that to him. The more time he spent with Joe Lovegood, the more he liked him and his carefree personality.

"Well the rumor has it that you have much more than that, but I'll leave it alone for now. What do you think Dumbledore's chances are to still be Headmaster?" Seeing Harry's raised eyebrows implying 'I'm not about to comment on that' "Fine, fine, off the record."

"Off the record? He's finished as soon as the NEWTs and OWLs are given in June and he gives his goodbye speech at the final meal. They won't fire him now though.....at least I don't think so."

"Do you want him to be fired?"

"I won't answer that on or off the record, it's just too complicated a topic." Rita didn't look too happy about that, but accepted it without needing a look from her boss. They went over to her desk as she told them what she was working on, an investigation into the Malfoy fortune and where it came from. Rita was more of a news and gossip person than a pure writer, but she had adapted to the Quibbler way of doing things, and the story in its first draft was sufficiently spacey and lurid.

Over the next four hours Harry got a look at all facets of the operation, from the photography to selling ads. After lunch, Harry and Luna put on crude disguises and took some photographs in Diagon Alley, after which Harry learned how to develop them in the paper's darkroom (wizard photographs being developed in much the same way as muggle ones, just an added chemical at the right stage made them move). One would have thought Rita correct, that Harry was looking to buy The Quibbler, if the other employees weren't long familiar with Joe and the way he doted on his daughter.....a girl also known as their future boss.

At the end of the afternoon, while Luna was using the bathroom, Joe had a few words for Harry.

"Well now you've seen what my daughter wants, the job she'll someday have. I hope you don't think I've forced her into the business, which is why I wanted you to see it."

"I never really thought that Joe, she always smiles when she talks about The Quibbler. I may not know what my future career holds, but I'm very sure about hers."

"You're not sure yet? I would think Quidditch or something like that."

"That or something to do with the twins and my business, or even teaching at Hogwarts if Dumbledore isn't there anymore. It will all depend on what happens with our buddy Voldemort. Until he's dealt with.....or I'm dealt with, there's no point in making set plans.....though I do it anyway, to keep busy if anything." Joe faintly smiled at hearing that.

"Do I even want to ask if the word 'marriage' has come up?"

"Only in very vague general terms. Don't worry sir; you're not going to be a grandfather anytime soon."

"Thank goodness for that.....but when the time comes, I look forward to you becoming part of the family.....well officially anyway"

"Thanks for that Joe, Luna is very, very important to me.....and I would do anything to protect her."

"I know you would.....and don't you worry either, you'll never get a 'you're not good enough for my daughter' or 'you are too dangerous for my daughter to be around' speech from me. She's very smart, and can make those choices quite well on her own."

"She might just be the wisest person I know."

"Oh you two." Both the men grinned as their favorite person came back into the office.

Friday, January 2nd, 1997

The Leaky Cauldron

Noon

Still recovering from New Year's Eve and the huge party the twins had thrown at WWW, Harry entered the pub. He was hailed in a friendly manner by Tom the bartender, and directed toward a table in the corner. John Terry rose and shook Harry's hand.

"Pleasure to meet you Harry; I've been looking forward to this for quite awhile now."

"So have I Mr. Terry, my school friends will be insanely jealous."

"Call me John, have a seat." They ordered their lunch and made small chitchat until it arrived, including condolences for Arthur, Molly, and Remus. Terry, who was in his early fifties as far as Harry could

tell, spoke of remembering Molly and Arthur from Hogwarts, as well as his ultimately fruitless attempts to persuade Charlie to turn pro, and play for England.

"Now Harry, how serious are you about playing Quidditch professionally? I would imagine someone with your power, and your rumored wealth, would have a lot of avenues open to him."

"I'm serious enough that I wouldn't be wasting your time otherwise, but am I definite? Not yet, because I want to know what is involved."

"I take it also that you're interested in playing for the National Team? I imagine Craig Bellamy has already tried to recruit you to play for Wales."

"He wrote me, asking if I wanted a tryout."

"Not surprising, there are more than a couple players like you with multiple eligibility. I was at your match in November, very impressive. It makes me wonder what your ideal position might be once you turn professional."

"Well I've always been a Seeker until this year, but we've been playing some pickup games a couple times a month, and given that we don't use Seekers in them, I've had to play Chaser. My Captain noticed that I seemed to be pretty good at it, so she made me a contingency plan in our games."

"How much of your playing well at Chaser was your skill, and how much was the fact that you have a better broom than the others?"

"Probably some of both, though my broom is now three years old. Where do you see me playing once I leave Hogwarts?"

"I'd stay at Seeker if I was you, there are plenty of good Chasers around, but a Seeker who has never really lost a match is hard to come by."

"I lost once, in third year."

"I know, I was there.....and no one really considers that a loss, certainly Cedric didn't. He and I had this talk as well a couple of years ago. He was the only British Seeker coming out that year, and had a good chance to be drafted pretty high. There are a couple of teams that will only draft British and Irish players for their teams.....though those teams rarely place very highly."

"How does the draft work?"

"Well you know that there are 13 teams? (Harry nodded) The draft is two rounds, with each team getting two picks. Now you might guess that there are more players eligible than just Hogwarts graduates. Our league drafts from the entire Commonwealth, minus Australia and New Zealand, plus the United States. We have a deal with the Continental League, that's mainland Europe, and the Australasian League that we don't poach on players from their nationalities, and they return the favor. Now the United States, South America, and Africa have their own leagues, but they're pretty small, the Americans in particular still love their Quodpot. Think of it as similar to muggle Americans and their own version of football."

"I think I understand, so you're saying that there are players from Canada and India in our league, and places like that?"

"We have fifteen Canadians and twelve Indians, plus a few each from South Africa and Zimbabwe and a couple of other places. Now the rules state that you have to either be seventeen years old, or a graduate of a wizarding school to be eligible.....we have an unofficial policy of not touching sixth year Hogwarts students no matter how old they are....plus they have to declare their intent to play. Your former teammate Alicia Spinnet for example was one such player who didn't declare for the draft."

"I know, she kind of fell out of love with the game, plus she was having a lot of problems with her back. Give me a for instance, where do you see Katie Bell being drafted?"

"Right now, probably in the mid to late second round, though she will be drafted. This is her first year as the focal point of your offense, and it will be interesting to see how she handles it. Angelina Johnson was

the star for so many years; it seemed to be hard for Bell and Spinnet to get out of her shadow. Bell would be best off with a team that has good Chasers already, where she can fit in easily without needing to be the star. Johnson, for example, was drafted third overall last year by Portree, the first Englishperson taken.”

“What about Cho Chang? What are her prospects?”

“Before I answer, I want to make sure that this portion of the conversation is just between us, I don’t want this to wind up as gossip.”

“By all means John, not one person will know what you told me about Katie, Cho, and anyone else we talk about.”

“Good enough.....honestly I don’t see Cho Chang being drafted, unless there is some team that I don’t know about needing a Seeker badly and wanting to stay in country rather than going abroad.”

“She’s that bad?”

“She’s that average, and there are only three or four Seeker spots of the twenty-six opening up in any given year.....and there are a couple of teams that do as your House team does, and have one of the Chasers as reserve Seeker.” Harry looked surprised at that, and John saw that.

“Don’t be so shocked, I asked for, and received, a copy of each House’s roster at the beginning of the season, something I do every year. Anyway, Chang always manages to beat Hufflepuff, beats Slytherin about half the time, and never has beaten you or Ginny Weasley. In the old days one just had to be a multi-year starter on a House team and you could almost guarantee being drafted, not anymore.” Harry was fascinated to hear this stuff, and started throwing out names.

“Draco Malfoy?”

“While his father was alive? First round probably, by some team hoping for an investor, or blinded by pure blood pride. Without his

father he still would have been drafted, as he's got some talent.....though I hear he's been Death Eater implicated?"

"He has, he's gone into hiding. I have to ask, for my own morbid curiosity....." John didn't let him finish.

"Right now your friend Ron would not be drafted, but he's rapidly improving, and has five more games over the next eighteen months to improve his position. If he gets better like I think he will, he'll go to someone."

"What about Fred and George Weasley? They were terrific beaters."

"They declined to apply for the draft, and believe me they were sounded out about it by a number of teams. One of the problems was that they would only agree to play with each other, for the same team I mean. Another was that they were intent on starting their business.....sorry, your business, as I understand you're their partner. A waste really, three Weasleys who should have gone professional, and none did."

"Where do you see me being drafted?"

"That's a tangle Harry, for one easily identifiable reason: Voldemort. Let's say, for a minute, that Voldemort is either gone completely or seriously marginalized come July 1998 and your draft.....you would probably go number one, unless the team picking there is completely satisfied with their Seeker. I'll be honest when I tell you that your fame will help in that regard. At the very least you'll go second or third, if my read of the North American schools and their Seekers is correct."

"How much does something like that pay?"

"Right now a starter on any team will earn somewhere around 10,000 galleons per year (50,000 dollars in 1996 money), with superstars making double or triple that. Plus the best ones make good money with endorsements. That's based on a twenty four game regular season, plus playoffs. Every team but the last place team makes the playoffs, the top four teams get first round byes."

“How does a population as small as ours support thirteen teams, and allow them to pay that kind of money?”

“It doesn’t really, and that’s the rub. Most of the teams, including the one I represent, are owned by rich families who think nothing of losing 100,000 galleons a season on their team, as long as they can say that they own one. Quite a few muggle sports teams, both here and in America are in the same situation.”

“How long can that go on? I mean, won’t the money run out eventually?”

“Maybe it will, maybe it won’t.....but the richest pureblood families are very rich, and they can afford it. Is money a factor for you when choosing a career path?”

“Not really, but it would be nice to earn a living at my job. Now tell me about the National Team, and why I should trust all the advice I’ve gotten and reject a tryout with Wales.” John laughed out loud at that one, though he fully sympathized with Bellamy’s desire to put Welsh Quidditch on the map.

“Well I’m sure Oliver Wood and Angelina Johnson have advised you to wait (he smirked at Harry’s look), and I would add my voice to that as well. The two Seekers we have on our team, Michael Owen and Wayne Rooney are very good, and I just don’t see you beating either of them out, even with another year of play under your belt. That said.....Wayne is likely not going to be National Team caliber much past this World Cup, and his slot will probably open up. One more thing in favor of waiting.....you need some more experience before you play internationally.....I mean how many actual House Cup games have you actually played?” Harry did some counting on his fingers and arrived at his answer:

“Eight so far including this year.....dang, that isn’t very many is it?”

“Not really, and if I recall correctly only one of the seasons did you complete the whole thing. I told Dumbledore not to cancel the season back in your fourth year, but he didn’t want any distractions from that

stupid Tri-Wizard thing. Get some more game experience, a lot more.....and if I might suggest something odd.....start doing your Gryffindor practices with a broom other than your Firebolt, use one of the school brooms.”

“What would that do?”

“It will help you learn the mechanics of flying better, and you’ll learn some small tricks that will make flying a great broom, like you have, even easier.” This made so much sense that it made Harry go quiet for a couple of minutes as he thought about it.

“You said that Rooney is getting older, how long do Quidditch careers last usually?”

“Well it varies of course, the top players generally play anywhere from ten to fifteen years, depending on how young they start. We have more than a few players take a few years and go to muggle universities to study, the pressure of professional play can be kind of overwhelming for an eighteen year old kid.

“What other tips can you give me? About just being a better player in general I mean.”

“I can think of a few.....are you on any kind of exercise regimen?”

“Three mates and I run six mornings a week.”

“Keep that up for sure, and start to mix in some weight training. Not too much, as you’re still only sixteen years old. How far do you run?”

“About six or seven kilometers each time, and we’re going a lot faster than we did back in September when we started. It’s hard to say lately, given that we’ve been running on treadmills because of the weather (helpfully supplied by the Room of Requirement). What else would you recommend?”

“Have you ever thought about getting contact lenses? Eyesight is pretty important when going after the Snitch.”

"Honestly I never, I've always seen pretty well with my glasses like they are (he had finally gotten a decent pair of muggle glasses the previous August).....but once summer comes I'll be sure to look into that, I'll pretty much be at Hogwarts for the next six months."

"You should do that, though there's plenty of time. Are you intending to be Captain next year with Bell graduating?"

"I wasn't planning on it really; the job would mean a lot more to Ron than it would to me."

"You should reconsider that, you could use the leadership experience something like that would bring," You have no idea, thought Harry, who was at least pleased that word of his DA leadership wasn't common knowledge. The only part of the job that he really wanted was to be able to choose the players.....and next year that amounted to one Chaser to replace Katie. Harry figured that if he did do it, he wouldn't even hold tryouts and just pick one of the younger students.

"We'll see what happens, based on what's gone on in the past, the gig is mine if I want it.....because of seniority I mean."

"Well obviously the war is going to be your prime commitment for the time being, I understand that."

"What if the war is still going strong? How much difference would that make?"

"More than a bit.....few owners, mine included, would want Voldemort eying our team and making it a target. It's best for all of us to hope for a quick resolution to all of that.....in yours and Dumbledore's favor of course." On that somewhat cheery note, they started talking about other things, both of them having gotten what they came for. John felt that he had done as good a job as he could have of talking Harry out of playing for Wales, and the beginnings of an 'in' with the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry felt he had gotten a lot of good advice he thought, and a similar 'in' with such a high ranking Quidditch official. They parted after another twenty minutes, promising to talk again after the next Quidditch matches at Hogwarts.

Harry went on to Gringotts, where he was to meet Peter and Fortrap regarding the werewolf trust. They set up a potential network of potions makers who were available, in theory, to make the Wolfsbane. The difficulty with the trust was that no one had any remotely reasonable idea of how many werewolves there were in Britain and Ireland, so the amount of Wolfsbane that would be needed couldn't really be determined with any degree of accuracy. The potion itself was pretty expensive to brew, with some pricey ingredients.....and not just any potions maker could do it. They settled on ten: six in Britain, three on the Continent, and one in Ireland. Letters went out to them explaining about the trust and the need for their services. Charles Shepherd was one of them, and Harry intended to sound him out as soon as he got back to Hogwarts, as there hadn't been an Order meeting since the funerals (which was the last time he had seen him). Fortrap felt that most of the recipients would be amenable to the task, given that it provided them long-term income as long as they did their work competently, as the trust was open ended as to time.

Fortrap reported that the arrangements for Frank and Alice Longbottom had been made that morning, and they had gone home to Brighton just a few hours ago. Brighton had a tiny wizard population for some reason, less than twenty.....all but three of them part of the Longbottom extended family. Harry knew that it was happening today sometime, but Neville was holding off on having visitors until his parents got better acclimated to being home. Harry had gone over to Neville's house the day before, his first trip there, to help with the decoration and outfitting of Frank and Alice's room, and the rooms for the live-in nurses that would be on duty. The plan for now is that there would be two of them (the size of the trust guaranteed that no expense needed to be spared), rotating on twelve hour shifts, with a third being brought in for days off. The truth of the matter was, Frank and Alice didn't need much actual care in terms of physical therapy or medicine. They just needed watching over, to make sure they didn't wander, and to help them get to the bathroom. A doctor would be making visits two or three times a week, and one was always on-call for emergencies.

"Now that we've gone as far as we can today on the werewolf trust, I have another matter that requires both your attentions. I would prefer

to have the twins here as well, but my spies tell me that the shop is swamped right now, so I feel it would be ill advised to try and get one of them here. I just received this news about an hour ago, and I felt since you would be here anyway.....”

“Is this about the Zonkos thing?”

“Yes it is Harry; they’ve made a formal offer to buy out all three of you.” Fortrap took a long roll of parchment out and handed it to Peter. Peter quickly read through it, whistling at times.

“They’re offering you 5,000 galleons apiece, and collectively five percent ownership of Zonkos’. Their proposal has the Fred and George staying on as creative consultants.....another word for joke and prank inventors. There’s no mention of the electronics part of the business, so they probably don’t know about it.” Harry didn’t see how there was anything in this for him, particularly as he didn’t need the money right now, but he had to ask:

“How much is that portion of Zonkos worth?” Fortrap considered this for a moment.

“Probably somewhere around 40,000 galleons, give or take.....but its worth that only if they take over your business and get their customers back, they’ve been taking quite a hit with their British sales, though they’re still going strong in their overseas operations. If not, it’s probably going to decline in value. You three have an inherent advantage in that your customer base all seem to know you three personally, and that undoubtedly helps sales. You especially help the sales since you are a great promoter of the products; it’s the only thing you use your fame to sell. Plus you three are a nice story, and that cannot be discounted.” Peter was nodding his head in agreement.

“They would want me to promote Zonkos now?”

“Yes they would, and I believe that it is mentioned somewhere in the proposal about you being available for interviews and advertisements. All those aside, tell me Harry, what’s your first impression?”

"That a one thousand galleon investment in two troublemakers is now worth 55,000 galleons in less than two years, and it was something I did on the spur of the moment." Both Fortrap and Peter laughed at hearing that.

"Remarkable isn't it? It's one of the most successful startup businesses in recent memory, the twins have done a great job, abetted by you and Lee Jordan. The agreement specifies that Lee will have a role as manager of one of the Zonkos stores, be it in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, or in one of their other locations."

"Well I don't really want to sell, but I'll go along with whatever Fred and George want to do, they do all the work, so they should have the final say. I think the offer would get more of their attention if they hadn't just gotten 20,000 galleons each from Remus."

"Excellent point. Well take this with you and show it to them, just have them stop in some time after they've considered it.....and make sure they take some time to think about it, even if their first inclination is to reject it. If they have a counter-offer, or even a rejection, they should come see me and talk about it."

"I'll tell them Fortrap, I'll do it tonight when we're all at The Burrow. "(Harry couldn't bring himself to call it 'home') The meeting over, he rose and shook hands with the two of them, who still had some other business to talk about. He went over to the store to help out, but didn't talk about the offer until they got done with work and were cleaning up. Once the doors were locked, and Ron and Ginny had gone back home, he told them about the offer. After reading over the parchment, both of the twins adopted quite uncharacteristic expressions: ones of thoughtfulness.

"So that's why you wanted those two to go ahead of us.....well that was a good offer I must say. Offering us a piece of Zonkos was an especially nice touch."

"I couldn't agree more Fred.....but still, I don't think it was good enough. What do you think Harry?"

"I'll tell you what I told Fortrap, it is totally up to you guys, since you do all of the work. I just contribute cash and an occasional idea. What would be a good enough offer?" They thought about that for a minute.

"Well there's no mention of salary in there for any of us, I guess that would have to be negotiated. Plus they're going to want their customers back, so we'll need more upfront money as well."

"So you are open to selling? That's kind of surprising; I would have thought you'd reject it out of hand."

"We heard the rumors as well Harry, even before you told us last week.....so we've kind of been preparing for this. I don't especially want to sell, but it would be nice just to be able to concentrate on inventing.....but no, unless their offer gets much better, I have to say no.....but I won't object if you two want it."

"Well I agree with brother George, I'd sell if they offered a lot more, but as it stands now.....I think we should wait until the electronics niche gets up and running. If it fails, then we can revisit this.....if it succeeds though, then we'll need a much larger vault at Gringotts."

"I'm with Fred, I think we shouldn't even prepare a counter-offer until summer time and we see how the movies and music shakes out. All those in favor?" All three raised their hands, and the issue was now decided.....however temporarily.

Saturday, January 3rd, 1997

The train ride to Hogwarts was taken up with the trunk initiation, as the boyfriend/girlfriends were dealt with first. Anthony, Tracey, and Susan were more than willing to sign another parchment and were admitted to the trunk system and fingerprinted into the security mode. This was the girls' first time inside and there were the obligatory oohs and ahhs. All three were impressed to say the least with the floor system, and they spent some time hopping between trunks. Once they were settled in, Harry and Ron went out into the train to get the next group of people. This went on two more times until the entire dance group, plus Katie, were all crowded (comfortably) in Ron's trunk (Harry's having all the bookcases, so not as much room for

fifteen people). As almost all of them had been to dinner at The Burrow at some point, they didn't need to hear the Snape story in any more detail (Harry whispered to Katie that he would fill her in more when they got to school).....not that Harry had ever flat out admitted to killing Snape, he simply implied that The Daily Prophet wasn't given a complete account of what happened. There was a lot of speculation on Dumbledore's future, and what would happen at the Board meeting due to take place in less than three weeks. Harry told them that while he couldn't bring himself to stick up for Dumbledore after all the crap he'd pulled.....it was far better to have one's adversaries where one could see them. The last thing he wanted was the old man let loose in the outside world to cause trouble.

At the welcome back feast there was a constant murmur in the air, as many students wondered what Dumbledore would say to them. Quite a number of people had made a point to come up and commiserate with Ron and Ginny (Harry's relationship to Remus was much less well known). The old man waited until everyone had eaten before standing up.

"Welcome back everyone, I trust we all had a good holiday and are ready for the coming term. We have two special announcement to make about a pair of very exciting events that will take place at Hogwarts this winter and spring. Professor Bliss, if you will." There was a buzz among the students as Bliss stood up.

"Over the next couple of months here at Hogwarts we are going to have what I hope will become an annual event: A Dueling Tournament." The buzz turned much louder as everyone seemed to be talking at once. Ron looked at Harry, who didn't seem the least bit surprised. Ron raised his eyebrows questioningly at him, but Harry just mouthed that he'd tell him later.

"The tournament will be open to everyone in the school, regardless of age.....and all students in Defense Against the Dark Arts are required to participate, and to do your best, as this will be a valuable educational experience for you. Those sixth and seventh year students who are not taking Defense may take part in the tournament if you like, and will get extra credit in your Charms class if you do. Now there will be a few interesting twists in this tournament. First,

Harry Potter will not be taking part." Many, if not all, heads turned in Harry's direction as she said this. Bliss continued after a second as if nothing strange had happened.

"Harry will not be entered in the tournament because it is the opinion of the entire faculty that he would win rather easily, thus taking the fun out of the competition for everyone else. However, there will be a four person teacher mini-tournament involving Harry, Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, and myself. I will tell Harry's friends now not to be mad at him for not telling them about this, I swore him to secrecy so as to not spoil the surprise.....and judging by their expressions, he kept his word. Thank you Harry." Flitwick stood up and started explaining the rules:

"The tournament will be single elimination, no second chances. The main body of the tournament will be seven rounds; with some of the younger students contesting elimination bouts to reduce the number of entrants to 256 (think March Madness times four). There will be eight seeded competitors, to ensure that the top students don't face each other in the opening rounds. The seeded students, in no particular order, are: Ron Weasley, Terry Boot, Blaise Zabini, Cho Chang, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, Jack Sloper, and Ginny Weasley." Sloper was the name that caused the most curiosity among many students, not many of whom knew he was the top Defense student in his year. He was also the only non-executive council member to be seeded. Noteworthy in their absences from that list were Hermione and Lisa Turpin.

"Each duel will last until one student is either unconscious or surrenders, there will be no time limit. No Dark curses will be allowed, and it should go without saying that Unforgivable curses are unforgivable. Physical contact will only be allowed if the other person has your wand in their possession. The competition will take place on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, and the competitors will not know in advance who they are facing.....until the final two that is. The first round matches will take place on the weekends of February 1st and 2nd, and February 8th and 9th, to accommodate the 128 matches that will be held. Competitors will only be told what day they are dueling on. The next rounds will take place each week afterwards. The teacher tournament will take place the final weekend, which will

be held on March 22nd and 23rd. In consideration of this, the next series of Quidditch games: Slytherin versus Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, have been postponed until Saturday March 1st and Saturday March 8th respectively. Mr. Potter, would you like to add anything?"

"Yes sir I would. I am announcing now that the Defense Association is closed to new members until the end of the tournament. Our membership has been very dedicated over the last four months and I'm proud of the strides we have made. That said, I wouldn't want our progress disrupted by joiners who would only be out to improve their chances in the tournament. If any of you out there who aren't already members would like to join us, we would welcome you with open arms after you have been eliminated from contention." Harry took the Sonorous off his throat and went back to his pumpkin juice.

"Thank you Mr. Potter. If anyone has any further questions about the tournament, see either myself or Professor Bliss after class. Oh yes, the grand prize for the winner: The winner will receive two hundred points for their House, and a book of gift certificates from stores in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Headmaster?" Dumbledore took the floor again to make the second announcement.

"I am also pleased to tell you about a special event that will deal with a subject close to the heart of most everyone in here: Quidditch. We have arranged for an exhibition game with the Maple Leaf School of Magic, from Toronto, Canada. The game will be an all-star game between the two schools, made up of the best players from all of the individual Houses at each school. The game is tentatively scheduled for Saturday May 31st of this year. The date is late enough so that the Quidditch Cup matches at both schools will be completed by that time. The Hogwarts team will be chosen by Madam Hooch, in consultation with some of the many professional Quidditch scouts that attend our matches. We feel that this is an important step in promoting harmony amongst the various wizarding academies around the world, and it is my fervent hope that this too may become an annual event, where we get to know our brothers and sisters across the ocean. Now, you may return to your Common Rooms and get ready to shake the rust off your academic impulses. Goodnight." With that, everyone began heading to the door. Once back in

Gryffindor Tower, the boys went right up to their room and Ron's trunk, as Ginny motioned for Katie to follow her into the fifth year girls' room. Ron couldn't resist one shot at the Listening Charms he assumed were still there:

"Hey Dumbledore, I just wanted to thank you again for your best friend making me an orphan! You'll always be my favorite Headmaster you know!" Now one would ordinarily think that Ron would be smiling when he said that, but his face was filled with hate when he said it. Harry and Neville did their best to forestall a rant on this topic and pulled him quickly into the trunk. They were met there by Katie and Ginny, and soon thereafter by Luna and Lisa, Ron having calmed down by now. Everyone quickly started talking at once, all wanting to know the same thing. Lisa finally put two fingers in her mouth and let loose with an ear splitting whistle that quieted everyone down. Ginny took the opportunity presented and asked the obvious:

"Ok Harry, spill it. What did you know and when did you know it?"

"I knew nothing about the exhibition Quidditch game, not a bloody thing.....though I think it's a great idea. About the Dueling Tournament? I found out a few days before the dance....and that night (he shivered a little). Bliss and Shepherd told me then, and got me to agree not to compete in it. They made me promise not to say anything guys, really.....and with everything else that's been going on, I really haven't thought much about it to tell you the truth."

"Did you want to be in it? I think she was right you know, you would wipe the floor with any of us."

"Well Katie I don't know, on the one hand it would be fun.....but I have to agree that I would win it....and you guys know I hate saying things like that. The teacher thing will be fun though, just the thought of getting to fire hexes at McGonagall....." He had a dreamy smile on his face, as he had lost some of his liking for his Head of House since her intervention on Hermione's behalf, though none of his respect.

"Are we going to working on individual dueling stuff in the DA? I know most of the kids will want that."

"I don't think so Ron, we'll just continue with what we're doing so far, building teamwork skills and the like. In the executive council? You better believe we will, it will be very bad if one of you doesn't win that tournament. I mean I like Jack, he's a nice guy and all.....but he'd better not win, or even take any of you out. If one of you faces an outsider in the finals, I'll do whatever I have to do to get you ready, short of taking Polyjuice and doing a little switching." That brought a smile on everyone's face.

"Oh yeah, you'd look great in a ponytail.....I'd pay to see that."

"How much? Make me an offer." Luna started giggling, and pointed her wand at Harry, who barely managed to snatch it away in time.

"No, no, no.....I prefer the shaggy look thank you very much, plus it hides the scar." He put Luna's wand in his pocket; they both knew they would have some fun when she tried to retrieve it later. Talk then turned to the Quidditch exhibition.

"Well you're the lock for Seeker Harry, I'm going to make sure to leave you there against Ravenclaw, so you can beat Chang out. I wonder who'll be Seeker for Slytherin? Or Captain for that matter."

"I think the two are linked probably. I would think that Shepherd will appoint one of the current guys, and they won't go outside their alliances to pick the players. Either way, I'm not going to worry about their chances against us, unless there's some unknown Seeker talent hiding there who's been unable to get a tryout. But yeah, I think it's between Cho and me for the Seeker spot (even though Ginny had finished three games as Seeker, she knew she wasn't of the caliber of Harry), unless Megan Jones just plays out of her mind the next two games."

"Before the Hufflepuff game I would have though Zach Smith for one of the Chasers, but even before he got hurt he didn't play very well, and I don't see how you can pick one of the Slytherin guys, they'll cause an international incident after they try to kill one of the Canadians."

They talked about the various merits of all of the Chasers for awhile, and they thought that Katie was a good bet for one of the spots, and that Natalie and Ginny also had a decent chance (though Harry thought that including Ginny was more to spare her feelings, as most everyone thought that she was the weakest of the three Gryffindor Chasers). Keeper was the one where no one really knew how it was going to shake out.

"I mean you have to say that Nott is pretty good, if he lasts until May without being 'outed' as a Death Eater. Most of the goals Ravenclaw scored on him were penalty shots. Justin was pretty good, and it was hard to tell with Stephen Cornfoot, since the Slytherin Chasers were so bad.....I kind of think that I might be the odd one out, because they might need to pick a Slytherin or a Hufflepuff for balance." Katie agreed with this:

"It is a shame in one small way that Crabbe and Goyle left.....don't tell Seamus and Michael this, but I thought the two goons were the best Beaters of the first set of games. They could have been the Slytherin representatives, and we still would have had a good team."

"Who knows whether they'll even do that, given that they'll be getting input from the Quidditch scouts (only Luna knew about his meeting with John Terry, as it would have been too tempting otherwise to talk about his player evaluations). I doubt those guys will care about what House somebody is in, they'll just want the best players so that it's a good game. We've only had one game so far, things will shake out more after next month, plus we'll see who the new Slytherin players are." After some more chitchat, the girls went off to their rooms and to bed (Harry tossed Luna her wand back, they would have to play keep away another time).

The three boys went into Harry's trunk, where they carefully arranged the pensieve on the living room table, and arranged the charms and defenses. Harry also took the precaution of putting multiple disguising charms on his book collection and on the fireplace, making it appear as though the bookcases were filled with muggle paperbacks, and the fireplace was replaced by an aquarium (with no fish though, Harry wasn't quite that advanced). Satisfied, the boys went up into their

dorm room. The bait was now placed, the only question was: when would the trap be sprung?

Author's Note: Sorry about this being a day late, I've been having some computer problems. Nothing of the story got lost, but I got caught up in repairing programs yesterday. Just for the sake of argument, let's assume that all references to football mean soccer. Plus, I haven't seen the movie Dodgeball, and don't especially want to either, so what happens later isn't inspired by it.

Sunday, January 5th, 1997

Slytherin Common Room

10:00 am

As Blaise came down from the fourth year dorm room, he spotted Theo Nott sitting by himself by the fire. There had been quite the buzz the night before in the Common Room about the disappearances of Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle, which left Nott alone as the only dark sixth year boy, though he still had his fourth year roommate Trevor Miller. Nott was always the quietest of the sixth year boys, Blaise included.....and now he had even more reason to be quiet. Blaise thought there was nothing to lose in being nice to him.

"Hey Theo, how's it going?" This was said in a friendly tone of voice, but not too friendly.

"Not bad Blaise, how was your holiday?" This was promising.

"Very quiet thank goodness, just a nice two weeks with my family. How's your mom doing?"

"She's fine thanks.....what's on your mind Blaise? This is the longest conversation we've had in months." Blaise sighed, what was curious was that the question wasn't asked in a hostile way, but in a tired way really.

"Just a tiny hope that things can be like they were Theo, we used to be friends man.....what changed?"

"My father was what changed Blaise, he put a lot of pressure on me to join Malfoy.....and then when he was captured.....well I was afraid that if I didn't stay with Malfoy then father wouldn't be rescued."

"You're not your father Theo; you don't need to walk his path."

"What will I be if I repudiate my family? In a perfect world I wouldn't care who wins, Potter or Voldemort. I mean Potter doesn't seem like a bad guy really (he hesitated, and both of them looked around for any listeners, but found no one), and he's certainly got guts.....but my family is four square for Voldemort, and I....." Blaise had never seen him look so confused, and even a little lost.

"Look Theo, I'm not going to try to sell you on Harry.....but you're right, he's got guts, he's a leader.....and he's all inclusive. He didn't bat an eye taking in Daphne, Tracey, and me, and he treats us just like the rest of his friends, as equals. I can say this too.....if you join us, there will be a place for you with House Zabini. I'm not saying that to try and bribe you, I'm just saying that it is not like you won't have anywhere to go if you go against Voldemort. Think about it Theo.....I mean can you honestly tell me that you liked Draco?" Nott's face contorted a bit.

"The things I do for my father.....no, I didn't enjoy hanging around Malfoy, and you might notice that I didn't do it terribly often. Look Blaise, I won't make any promises except that I'll think about it, I'll think about what you've said."

"I can't ask for anything more Theo, and I won't. Thanks man." After looking around again, they shook hands, and went off to brunch separately. On the way out the door, Blaise was stopped by Professor Shepherd.

"Blaise, with Draco apparently dropped out of school, his Prefect job will need to be filled. Given your academic standing it makes the most sense for it to be you. Do you want the position? It's either you or Mr. Nott obviously."

This would have been an easy question to answer fifteen minutes ago.....but now that a bridge, however slender, had been built to

Theo.....maybe it would be a good move to let him have it? After a minute of thought, as Shepherd could see the indecision play out on his face, he decided that he just couldn't take that big a chance on Theo right now. The pro-Harry Slytherins needed at least one Prefect on their side, and it would have to be him.

"I'll take it Professor."

"I thought as much, the next Prefect meeting is at 1:00 pm today, they generally last about thirty minutes or so, and are held every week." He handed Blaise a badge, and took his leave.

Also heading to brunch was the Gryffindor male Trio, after Harry and Neville were forced to listen Ron curse Dumbledore again.....and very creatively. Neville muttered to Harry after they dragged him away again.....though they let him rant a bit longer than last night.

"I've never heard some of those combinations before."

"Maybe its good for him, lets loose some of his anger.....plus I want that old meddler to be reminded of what he let happen."

They went silent as they passed by the Listening Charm by the fireplace, something they did almost automatically by now. Ron had calmed down again, though not as quickly as he had last night. Harry was getting a bit worried about him; this merited a close watch for the next few days. He didn't want him going off half cocked and trying anything stupid.

"Do you think he'll take the bait today?"

"I doubt it, but you never know. I'm betting he'll wait until I'm in class tomorrow or the next day, when he can be sure of where I'll be. Today is just a crapshoot, I might be there at any time.....unless he has his own version of the Map." The three of them contemplated that for a moment as they walked down the hallway.

"What about him getting into the trunk? I thought that Anthony Hook guy said that the trunks couldn't be gotten into without the proper fingerprints?"

"With Dumbledore anything is possible. One of two things will happen Ron: The first is that Dumbledore will try, but fail, to get into my trunk; the second is that he'll succeed and pay a visit to my pensieve. Either way, we'll get the evidence.....and I'll have some more blackmail material." That stopped the other two dead in their tracks. Neville managed to say it first:

"Could you sound a bit less eager when you say that Harry? I know you two have gone round and round, but do you really want the guy to be fired? Has it become that personal between you guys?"

"I'm beginning to want that, yeah. I just don't think we'll ever have peace here if he's still around."

"Remember what you've been saying the last weeks Harry, better to keep the old meddler around where we can see him." This came from Ron, the serial rant artist.

"I know I know.....but just waiting for the shoe to drop with him is already getting on my nerves." Neville looked concerned.

"Perhaps this whole pensieve caper is a bad idea. Just leave the darn thing on your night stand and let him see the message we've sent him, and that will be enough. That way the message will be sent, and no one will get hurt."

"Maybe he's right Harry, maybe we should leave well enough alone for now.....and are you really sure the disguising charms on your books and the floo will hold up if he gets too curious? You've said it yourself a thousand times, we can't risk discovery of the trunk floo." By this time they were almost at the Great Hall, having walked pretty slowly as they argued this out. The other Gryffindors were used to seeing these debates among the Trio, and had long stopped paying attention, given that they were always done at normal volumes of voice (unlike with Harry, Ron, and Hermione), and with no histrionics.

"A few minutes ago Ron, you were cursing his name and his bedroom habits with great vigor.....now you want me to lay off him? What gives there?" Ron looked a bit sheepish.

"I lost a bet with Ginny over chess last week, she took another game from me, and the loser had to curse Dumbledore twice a day for a week to one of the Listening Charms. I mean everything I'm saying mind you, I loathe the man, and after the war if you don't take care of him I will.....but once the week is over, I won't be doing it so much." Harry knew he should find this funny, but instead stopped walking and pulled the other two into a corner where they couldn't be heard.

"Look you guys; something has become pretty plain to me over the last few months. You haven't heard some of the things that Dumbledore has said to me, about me going down the wrong path, and 'I've heard statements like that before', implying that I'm turning into Tom Riddle the sequel. Once I get the pensieve up and going I'll let you see it. Now let's say that I defeat Voldemort as per all of our plans.....how long do you think it will be before the old man starts talking me up as the next Dark Lord? I'm thinking weeks, as soon as the euphoria dies down from the victory."

"He wouldn't dare, you'd be the new hero, even more famous than you are now." Neville didn't seem so sure about that.

"I don't know Ron, he has a point. Dumbledore could just say that Harry only defeated Voldemort because he used some kind of new Dark magic.....this whole 'the power he knows not' business, given that no one really knows what it means." He looked at Harry in a new way. "Do you think he was planning this all along? To use you as the weapon and then discard you?"

"I don't know, I want to believe that he's just having an immature reaction to my wanting to control my destiny.....but what it boils down to is that I'm scared guys, I'm scared that if I somehow defeat the most powerful wizard that we know of, I'll be seen as his replacement, and painted with that brush. That's why this Fudge business has me both glad and worried, if he can cut a deal with me, he can cut one with Dumbledore." Neville had heard enough, and turned around and started to pull the three of them back toward Gryffindor Tower. Ron protested.

"Hey, what are you doing? I'm hungry man, we're going the wrong way."

"Look, that was a very dangerous conversation we were having, and I won't have anyone overhearing it. We can eat in the trunk Ron, it's not like you've ever turned down Winky's food before." Harry just looked curiously at Neville, but allowed himself to be pulled along back to the Tower.....passing Hermione and Colin among others, who stared at their retreating backs. Once they got into Neville's trunk, he explained what he was doing.

"Look here you two, its one thing to preach revolution against Dumbledore amongst us and our friends.....but it's another one to do where just anyone can listen. Like it or not, our extreme opinions about the old man are in the minority around here right now, and until we lay some groundwork, it'll stay that way. You want Hermione overhearing something like that? How fast do you think she'll make a beeline to tattle on us?"

"Fair enough Neville, you're right. We have to plan this a bit better."

"Right, and the first thing you're going to do is not let him get fired at that meeting coming up. Get more restrictions placed on him if you can.....but like Ron said, we do not need him let loose where he can cause trouble for us. I agree with Snape that he's not going to change sides to Voldemort.....but it's become quite clear that he's not on our side either, and wants to make sure that when we win, it will be in a very sloppy way.....I think you're right Harry, he's setting you up.....but we have to be careful, and plan this well. Now there's no executive council meeting this afternoon right? (Harry nodded). Well then we start making our case individually to people, starting with the trunk circle."

"I have to agree with him Harry, you can't go for the jugular yet. First thing to do is what Neville said, remove the pensieve trap." Without another word, Harry flooed over to his trunk and removed all of the booby traps, though he kept the hiding charms on the bookcases and floo (the security camera he had set up showed him emerging from the aquarium, quite a sight). After placing the pensieve on his nightstand, per the suggestion (and admiring his favorite souvenir,

Snape's wand), he joined the other two, where Winky was sleepily serving up waffles.

"Happy now guys? I was so looking forward to him tripping those booby traps."

"You still have the camera set up in our room right? That'll be evidence enough for our friends.....and others. It won't be enough to get him sacked obviously, since he has every right to be poking around in there.....but the point will be made sufficiently." They stopped talking about Dumbledore during their meal, as it interfered with the digestion.

Every little while, Harry would whip out his wand and try to penetrate one of their minds (he was getting pretty good at Legilimency, but didn't yet feel comfortable doing it without his wand). Once the initial practical lessons were over, Neville had proven that he was the best of the bunch at it, but Ron and Ginny had made steady improvement after a week of instruction by Peter.....who decided that it was part of his Order duties, and thus didn't charge Harry for it (he still paid anyway). Harry and Bill agreed between each other to throw these random tests at them, and the others were getting better and better at slowing down the penetrations at first, then throwing them out. None of the three had picked it up as well as Harry or Luna had, but the results so far were encouraging.

After brunch settled, they let Dean talk them into playing a game of football with some of the younger Gryffindors in the Room of Requirement (it was still too cold outside), a game that wound up being a lot of disorganized fun, though it frustrated Dean to no end at times (he was constantly yelling at Neville not to catch the ball with his hands.....Neville wasn't playing keeper either). It was never going to compete with Quidditch, but was a nice diversion. Afterward, one of Harry's fears came to fruition, as Colin and Dennis approached him.

"Harry, we'd like to talk with you for a minute." Here it comes he thought.

"Sure guys, what's up?"

"We'd like to talk for a minute about expanding the executive council."  
It was a pain in the rear to be right sometimes.

"Follow me for a minute." He walked out of the room, and motioned for Neville to follow him. Ron didn't join them, as even he acknowledged that he was beyond biased on the subject. Neville could be counted on to be rational and thoughtful.....Harry had been much impressed by his reasoning that morning. The four boys went down to Dungeon Seven (after Harry discreetly checked the Creeveys for tracking charms, as he had been doing since Colin and Hermione got together), where they could talk in private. Colin did most of the talking for the two brothers.

"Ok, now that there are no prying ears.....you want me to add Hermione to our council don't you?"

"We think she would add something to the group.....and we feel that she's served her punishment Harry."

"Well that's one view.....unfortunately it doesn't happen to be mine. That said, I don't have much else to do right now, so I'm willing to listen to any reasonable argument you can make. Before you say anything for her, I want to know something: Does she know you're making this approach?"

"Yes she does Harry, I didn't want to do this if she wasn't interested, and she is interested. She feels really badly about what happened with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and with Remus. I think she's ready to forsake Dumbledore, she's not spoken well of him in the last couple of weeks." Neville shot back right away.

"And how much of that is just a temporary guilt over the deaths of three people that she cared about? And even Ron and Ginny will admit that she did care about them."

"The two of us have spent a lot of time with her over the last couple of months, we believe that she started the process before they died.....and we heard about what happened at the platform, that was her reaching out, something I'm sure she was scared to do, given

what's gone on between you guys." That was not a good thing to say to Harry, whose expression darkened immediately. Dennis quailed under that gaze, and even Colin flinched visibly.

"What the hell are you implying Colin? What in fact has gone on between us? I don't recall us doing anything bad to her, other than involve her in our.....'situations', all of which she entered voluntarily, and which she certainly felt that she was supplying the brains for. All the while, I might add, she was telling Dumbledore what we were doing! She never said precisely how long she'd been doing it.....but if it had been only one time I would have easily forgiven it.....twice? That's a pattern developing.....and all four of us know full well that it was much more than twice." Colin rallied, and both Harry and Neville had to admit to themselves that he now had sand that hadn't previously shown itself.

"She was afraid of lying to Dumbledore; he was very persuasive when he said it was for your own good. She thought he was just trying to protect you for its own sake, she didn't know it was because of some prophecy." Neville handled this one; they were getting quite good at double teaming people, needing to use it to talk Ron and Ginny out of carnage more than once.

"That does not excuse it, so sorry. One can come up a rationale for anything if enough effort is put into it. To give you an example: for years Harry was forced to live with those muggles, for his own protection of course.....no matter that it devolved very quickly into child abuse.....and Dumbledore knew all about it, and Hermione knew that.....as well she should, having to listen about it from Harry for five school years. Yet she still kept silent, and still kept informing."

"I don't blame you for sticking up for her Colin, in fact I'd be disappointed in you if you didn't.....but her being your girlfriend is not enough for me to overlook what's gone on in the past. I just can't be sure that she won't decide that it is for my own good to answer some more questions about my activities."

"Doesn't the parchment take care of that? I mean so far no one has talked to an outsider have they? Dumbledore must know that there's

an inner group in the DA, and yet he apparently hasn't questioned anyone."

"That he knows about the executive council is one thing; hell, he admitted it to me when he confronted me about the Listening Charms that we muted the very first time. Look guys, a secret is only as valuable as the number of people carrying it.....and we have a lot of people carrying our secrets anyway. Now in a perfect world, yeah, we would have her rejoin us, and Jack Sloper come in too, along with a few other people.....but this isn't a perfect world, by any stretch. We have a large enough council as it is, I don't know that there is room for more."

"Is there really nothing she can say to make up for it? Is it that far gone?" Harry gave Neville a look that communicated quite clearly the following message: 'repeat what I'm about to say to other people and I'll boil you for dinner'

"Colin, Dennis, I want you to understand something about where Ron and I are coming from.....and it is mostly Ron and I that are generating this, since Neville wasn't fully one of us until last year, and we deliberately kept Ginny away from most of it. Hermione was our best friend, we were three strong and could take on the world.....and we sometimes tried. I know I leaned on her more than I did Ron, because of her brains, and in part because I knew that she didn't care about me being famous or rich, and at the time Ron did a little. She knew how much I counted on her, how much faith I had in her.....but that didn't stop her from talking to Dumbledore. Ron of course had feelings for her (this was common knowledge, so he wasn't betraying any confidences), though we never got around to asking her whether she had any for him.....and if you know don't tell me, I don't want to know (Neville fought back a smile and shook his head that he didn't want to know either). The thing is though; she did know that Ron had them, even if she may not have felt that same way.....but that didn't stop her from talking to Dumbledore."

Both of the Creeveys pondered this for a few moments, as Harry kept quiet to let it sink in. Neville too was pretty moved by it, and he'd heard the crux of the argument many times before. He looked Colin straight in the eye:

"Look guys, we appreciate what you're trying to do for her, and we agree that in theory she would be useful.....but I know this much: the rest of the council feels much as we do, that she just poses too many risks. Now the thing Harry and I need to know now.....is this a deal breaker for you?" There was more silence as the two of them hesitated. They had agreed beforehand that it just might be.....until they heard Harry's real reasons, which they supposed they could understand.

"What if it was? Would we be kicked out if we insisted?"

"Kicked out isn't the phrase I would use.....but if you insisted, yes.....we would remove your names from the parchment and do a little memory modification on you (they paled when told of that) to make sure that you don't spill anything. It will be no harm, no foul of course, we'll still all be friends. Let me say though that I hope you don't choose to leave, your contributions to the group are valued (Neville needed all his composure not to roll his eyes at that one). That said, I have to think about all of the three dozen some members of the council.....and they would be heavily against letting her in unless I strongly endorsed it, and I can't do that.....I won't do that."

"We'll think about what you said Harry; assume that for now we're still in."

"Good enough, now let's get back upstairs." They left and made the journey back up to Gryffindor Tower, with Harry and Neville only going to the door, as they had only wanted to see that no one followed them back up, Harry not having the Map on him. Once they younger students were through the door, Harry and Neville wandered toward the library.

"Would you really let them walk? I mean I know they're not valuable in a defense sense, but they are pretty popular with the younger years."

"They won't walk; they need this more than we need them. Colin did it just for romantic reasons more than anything."

"I thought she claimed that she doesn't want any part of the war? What does she imagine we do in those meetings? Play Exploding Snap?"

"I think in her own way it's a form of apologizing, and saying that she may have overreacted to what happened at the DOM."

"Yet you won't accept it." That wasn't asked as a question, it was made as a statement.

"No I won't, not as it is currently being offered. First off it would be a betrayal of Ron and Ginny; second.....well I just don't want to give in to her half hearted apology. She's only doing it because she knows now that she lost, not because she truly believes she was wrong. If she did, she wouldn't have allowed those two to act as her emissaries, she would do it herself."

"You're forgetting the most important reason for you, right?" Harry looked puzzled for a second.

"Luna doesn't like her.....and she likes practically everyone. I know she's YOUR girlfriend, but I've noticed that she is the best judge of people that I've ever met." Harry chuckled, and they walked back to the Tower. They told Ron and Ginny what happened, and sent off an owl to Bill as well. Hermione avoided them for the rest of the night, so her reaction to the rejection was plain.

Number 12 Grimmauld Place

9:00 pm

Bill looked at Tonks and Moody and tried to think of where to begin voicing his suspicions. Over the last hour he had received a crash course in what many of the undercover Order operatives were up to. Harry's posit to his friends before had been true: Dumbledore had enlarged the Order to roughly double of the number that attended the meetings. Moody had, in effect, been acting as Dumbledore's deputy for the last six months, and was in the know on everything, needing to be in the loop in case something happened to Dumbledore. This was not something Dumbledore had especially been eager to do, but

Moody had insisted on it right after Umbridge had taken control of Hogwarts and made the old man a fugitive, however briefly.

Bill knew all about the pensieve plan, and was on board with Neville and Ron in that regard, it was just too much right now. Maybe later, when Bill had a more firm control of the Order they could revisit it. Now his problem was Tonks, and how to get her back on board and away from Dumbledore. Moody was getting up to leave, but Bill stopped him, he wanted a witness to this.

"So Tonks, I'll cut right to the chase: Why are you talking with Dumbledore so much? I know you reported to him after Harry bought the pensieve.....a bit suspicious don't you think?" Tonks didn't even consider lying to Bill.

"Not really suspicious as such, he wanted me to update him on anyplace curious that Harry goes. He says he's concerned about him. It's nothing more than what I've been doing since July." Tonks didn't say this in a defensive way really, but it wasn't a totally confident reply either.

"Tonks, you don't report to Dumbledore anymore, I thought that was made clear."

"No it wasn't made clear Bill, it was only made clear that I report to you now, and I do that." Bill shook his head at that, it was true in a sense, as he hadn't had any specific conversations with just her on that or any subject since he had taken over the Order two weeks ago.

"Are we clear now? You are not to enter that castle, period. You are not to meet with Dumbledore without myself or Mad Eye present."

"What makes you think that you can tell me what to do on my own time? If I want to live in that castle that's my right." This too was said almost halfheartedly, though Moody looked like he was about to punch her, but kept hold of himself.

"Tonks, I know you love the old man.....and I know that you're still upset with Potter taking your wand five months ago (he said that with special emphasis, as if telling her to get over it).....but Bill is running

the Order now, and the vote really wasn't close you remember. He has our full support, even Hagrid and Diggle have gotten over it (they were the other votes not to remove Dumbledore). Tell us now, what is your problem? Do you honestly see Bill as Potter's tool?"

Tonks didn't really know what to say to that, but she tried anyway.

"I don't know Mad Eye, I don't. I want to believe that Bill is independent of Harry, I do. I guess I'm just so used to following Dumbledore that anything else just doesn't seem right."

"I'm not independent of him Tonks; I listen to what he says, just like I do everyone else. I just won't try to control him with rules and threats like Dumbledore did.....and I think my way is the best way, and gets the best results. Harry has never refused to do anything I've asked him to do you know, and he does that because he knows that I won't hide anything from him."

"You really think he's ready for this? You honestly believe he can do what it takes? Because all of our lives are at stake here you know. If he loses, we'll all either have to leave the country forever, or be liquidated. Killing Snape isn't enough of a test."

"Snape escaped Tonks, no one killed him."

"Oh please Bill, you don't think that anyone in the Order believes that do you? You guys took care of him right after we left I bet.....not that I blame you really, I wanted to do the same thing.....I would have helped if you'd let me." Tonks and Remus had been close friends, perhaps closer than anyone ever thought.....

"The night he was killed, Remus got back here right when Ashley and I did, he was all dressed up.....he had been with you hadn't he?" Tonks amazed both of them when she started to cry a little bit. Not a gusher mind you, but there was water leaking. After a few moments, she wiped her eyes with the bottom of her robe, revealing the camouflage pants that she wore.

"Yes he was.....we weren't on a date really, but we talked about it. We never actually 'did' anything, but we both thought there was

potential for a relationship." She sniffled a little bit, but didn't start crying again. The two men had the sense to keep silent until she collected herself, once that appeared to happen they relaxed a little.

"Tonks, please tell us that you don't blame Potter for Remus dying." This was said in a gentle kind of way, gentle for Moody anyway.

"No I don't blame him for it, or even for Sirius really. I think some of the things I said that night were from anger over Remus being killed.....but it was Snape's fault.....and yes, it was Dumbledore's too."

"Then why still follow him? Can you forgive him that easily, yet not forgive Harry, who was really only trying to defend himself from an unknown stalker back in August?"

"I don't know, I really don't.....do you swear that he doesn't lead you around by the nose Bill? Tell me that and I'll stop reporting to Dumbledore." What the hell was this, Bill thought, muggle primary school? Did she want a pinky swear or something? What in Merlin's name was he supposed to say if not 'yes I swear'? The fact was, he listened to Harry more than any of the others because the kid had a lot of clever ideas, ideas that Dumbledore never would have thought about listening to, let alone act on. Plus he knew that the students at Hogwarts were devoted to him, and if the war came to the school, they would be the front line troops.

"Harry does not lead me around by the nose Tonks, I promise."

"Ok, I did tell Dumbledore about the pensieve.....and he found the tracking charm Neville put on me, I take it the whole thing was a setup to trap Dumbledore and me?"

"Not exactly, he did want a pensieve for its own uses.....but life has its little bonuses. It was Charlie's idea in point of fact; he figured you might tell the old man." He didn't tell her about the Map, the tracking charm had been nothing more than a redundancy really, in case Tonks and Dumbledore met outside the castle.

"Tonks, what else have you told him?" This was Moody now; he wanted to know the full extent of the disclosures.

"Not much really, he doesn't leave Hogwarts that much you know. Hogsmeade trips are always pretty boring, though the picnic in the Shrieking Shack was a nice touch." Bill had heard about it from Tracey Davis, who had been a dinner guest at The Burrow during the Winter Holiday. Moody knew about it since Tonks had reported her spying to him and Dumbledore only.

"What did you hear when we had lunch with Fudge?"

"Nothing, the bodyguards wouldn't let anyone near the room, and they had multiple silencing charms on the room itself.....that was a nice parting shot by the way about me being able to go home."

"It added something to the moment I thought.....and to answer your question from before: Yes, I think that Harry can do it, and more importantly he thinks so too, he has the confidence now.....though none of us seem to know what that 'power he knows not' stuff means." Moody had an opinion on that one:

"I think he'll know the next time he faces Voldemort, that's when the power will appear, now that he's accepted his destiny." Bill wasn't so sure about that, Harry still talked of the Prophecy with some disdain, and Bill suspected that he only wanted to kill Voldemort out of revenge and because he thought few, if any, others were up to the job..... not because he was supposed to.

Tonks soon took off to parts unknown, though the two men were now pretty sure that she didn't have a boyfriend on the side.

"Do you believe her Moody? Do you think she's really forsaken Dumbledore?"

"Who knows, though it was rather easy to get her to agree. You think she's trying to play us?"

"I don't think so, but I should have slipped her some Veritaserum just to be safe. Look Moody, I've got a theory I want to run by you." He

told him of Harry's belief that Dumbledore was setting him up to be thought of as the next dark lord. Moody chuckled a bit, which was a little disconcerting.

"The lad's got a nice paranoid mind now I have to say, it's from hanging around the twins I bet. I think there's some truth there, we'll have to watch our friend very closely, it may be that he's just setting up the possibility.....but it does bear watching."

Tuesday, January 7th, 1997

Office Wing, Hogwarts

7:30 pm

The pensieve had so far remained undisturbed by Dumbledore or anyone else. During his classes on both days, Harry surreptitiously checked the Map whenever he could, but no one was up there who should not have been, nor did the security tapes show anything (the camera was placed up on the wall in such a way that only if you were looking right at it could you see it). When he arrived at Professor Bliss' office for his weekly private lesson, he was met not by his Professor, but by Travis Biller and Sarah Westbrook. This apparently was to be his first lesson with them. After he entered the room, Biller threw a Silencing Charm at the door before saying anything.

"Hello there Harry, welcome to lesson number one. First, I want you to sign this." He handed over a small piece of parchment and Harry looked it over.

"This is an application for my Apparition license. I thought you had to be seventeen years old to learn how to Apparate?" That said, he quickly scribbled his signature and handed it back.

"You do, but the Minister feels that you should learn ahead of time, just in case. There's one for your friend Longbottom too, the records say you and he have the same birthday almost. We're going to start in a couple of weeks, once you get used to us a little bit." He handed Harry another folded up piece of parchment, which he put in his pocket.

“What about Ron?”

“He turns seventeen in just over two months, so he can just take his test on his birthday like everyone else does, time isn’t a factor there. I’m assuming one of his brothers will teach him?”

“I know Bill was planning to, yeah.”

“Good, he’s a smart man Bill, he’ll sort him out. You and Neville Longbottom don’t really have anyone to teach you, so Sarah, Rob, and I will do the honors.....as long as we’re understood that you’re not to use this for fun until you actually do turn seventeen.....your emancipation doesn’t cover this, if Tyson didn’t tell you, it only covers legal decision making and wand work. But Fudge and Bones feel that you would be best served if you and Longbottom know how, and I quite agree.”

“He told me; otherwise I would have learned it by now. What about Ginny and Luna? They’re in just as much danger as the rest of us.”

“Not until they hit sixteen, the Minister isn’t willing to push Edwina Portle that much, and she would raise hell if he tried. They’ll just have to keep one of your skeleton portkeys handy, from your buddy Omar Cook.” Harry looked a bit confused....and then it dawned on him that Cook must be the twins’ contact in Knockturn Alley, who had supplied him with his toys.

“So you didn’t know his name eh? Smart move, plausible deniability.....except for the fact that everyone there knows that Fred and George Weasley are your men, and represent you to the outside world. Not that it’s a bad idea mind you, having two guys as sneaky as them front for you. It allows Bill to remain clean and above board, where he should be, as our future Minister and all that.”

“And Fudge wants you to keep an eye on me, doesn’t he?”

“Do you blame him? He knows that there’s something about you that Voldemort finds interesting, and I’m not saying that he feels you’ll go to the other side.....but he’s wary of a kidnapping attempt,

especially after you rejected Voldemort's offer, and after the murders." He didn't specifically mention the Prophecy, since he didn't know that Harry knew about the fact that Fudge had an inside man in the Order and knew the Prophecy (he suspected it was Fletcher, who was the one likely to be for sale).

"Why haven't you joined the Order? Your sympathies seem to lie in our direction."

"Sympathies, yes.....but I want to see what Bill does with things before I do anything concrete. My full time job is to go after Death Eaters anyway, so it's not like anything would change if and when I did join. Wouldn't you say Sarah?"

"I agree, though I'm with you in spirit too. I also have trouble taking marching orders from someone who isn't a professional."

"I take it you didn't care for Dumbledore's leadership? I always had thought that everyone worshipped the guy, now I keep finding people you and Peter Tyson and others who seemed to have held him in contempt all of these years."

"Your surprise doesn't surprise me; Dumbledore has always been the best self promoter in our world.....even better than Fudge if you ask me. No Harry, my feeling since this whole mess started back up again, is that Dumbledore has been trying to serve two masters, and doing neither of them well. The two masters of course being the war and his duties here at Hogwarts. Even when Voldemort didn't have corporeal form the old man didn't exactly have his eye on the ball at all times." Harry then ran his 'Dumbledore is going to turn on me after the war' theory by Biller and Westbrook. Biller didn't look at all surprised, while his colleague was a little puzzled.

"What would he have to gain by hanging you out like that? Would vengeance be enough for him?"

"I think Harry has a good point Sarah, if he defeats Voldemort then the old boy will be marginalized, and his ego might be too big to accept that. Well Harry enough about politics for the time being. You wanted to learn how to walk and move quietly, this is going to be your

first chance.....get us out of here and on to the grounds without getting any of us caught.”

“Okiedokie, follow me.....any particular place on the grounds that we’re heading to?”

“Hmmm.....how about the Quidditch Pitch.” Biller knew exactly where he wanted them to go, but he didn’t want to make it too easy.

Harry left the office and took out the Map, which he always carried with him at night in the castle.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” He saw that Filch was upstairs doing something that didn’t bear thinking about, and Peeves was down in the dungeons, hopefully terrorizing some Slytherins for him. Peeves had kept up his end of the bargain and provided him with a couple dozen pictures of him pranking Malfoy.....though the lazy poltergeist didn’t do so until the day of the dance, which made Harry forget that he even had them. That was the only real problem with such a big trunk, he sometimes lost track of his things in it. He had passed them around during the train ride to great effect. The one that had Crabbe with melted cheese all over him won the top prize in the unofficial competition.

Biller and Westbrook were very impressed with the Map, and Harry quickly led them through the front doors and outside. It was a short walk to the Pitch, and they got there without incident.

“Well technically that was cheating, but it’s good to use all the tools at your disposal. Now, we’re going to be taking a little trip inside the Forbidden Forest. The mission? To walk inside it for ten minutes without getting caught by the centaurs or the spiders, or anything else that might be lurking in there.”

“What if we do get caught?” He was thinking more about Grawp than anything. Given how little he had talked with Hagrid, he didn’t know if the giant was still in there or not.

“Better have your wand out, just in case.” What he didn’t tell Harry is that Rob Graham was in there, clearing a swath for them, making

sure that no one would find them.....but Harry didn't need to know that. He wanted to see how the kid would do, without him and Sarah needing to worry about fighting.

Harry tried to remember everything he'd seen in those war movies that the twins liked to collect (the twins had become serial movie watchers) about moving quietly. Finally he started goose stepping into the forest, wincing with every twig. It looked so comical that Biller had to whisper to him:

"What the bloody hell are you doing? This isn't a ballet recital you know. You've been in here before I thought."

"Yeah, three times, but I wasn't concentrating on being quiet then." He was referring to first year on his detention, second year with Ron and the spiders, and last year going to see Grawp.

"Well just move carefully, but don't worry about every twig. This is just the first lesson, and I doubt we'll have to fight anything tonight." He was just saying that to calm the lad down, but had let a bit too much slip.

"Rob's taking care of that is he?" Damn this was a smart kid, picking up on that.

"Something like that, yeah. I just wanted to observe you tonight, but it seems I've already underestimated you a bit." With that, he gave Harry a few pointers about moving through the forest, and they set off again. Since the deception was over, they stayed in the forest for an hour, moving about. Harry quietly told Travis and Sarah about Grawp, which gave them a start.....but Rob never threw up the panic signal, so either he never encountered the giant, or he did and dealt with it.

They emerged from the forest near Hagrid's hut, where they met with Rob.

"Any problems Rob? Did you find anything?"

"Just a centaur out on patrol, he.....well I think it was a he.....looked about ready to take a shot at me, but I managed to talk him out of it.

They certainly know who you are in there Harry, the centaur perked right up when I said I was working with you tonight.”

“In a good way or a bad way?” He was thinking about the last time he had met the centaurs, plus the continued presence of Firenze in the castle.

“It’s hard to tell with them you know, but he seemed very interested. We didn’t talk for long; there was some kind of sound signal that he got, so he had to leave.” Their voices hadn’t been too loud, but loud enough to start Fang baying.....which brought Hagrid out of his home.

“What’s going on here? Why are you outside Harry? You’re not supposed to be on the grounds this time of night.” Harry was momentarily at a loss for words, technically Hagrid was right. Fortunately Travis had prepared for that.

“No greetings for us Hagrid? It’s good to see you. As it happens, Harry has permission from Professor Bliss to be out here.....under our supervision of course.” He handed over the note, and Hagrid nodded at it.

“Well this seems to be all right, I’ll still have to tell Dumbledore, he won’t like this though.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way Hagrid, it’s too bad really.” At his signal, the three Aurors launched each a Petrificus Totalus at Hagrid. One spell probably would not have done the job properly, but all three, from quite powerful wizards and witch, did the trick. Harry stood there almost numb, he hadn’t been expecting this.

“Don’t worry Harry, we’re not going to hurt him. We just need to do a bit of memory modification. We can’t let Dumbledore know we were here.” Hagrid was lying flat on the ground, and for what it was worth Harry dearly hoped that the Obliviation worked, because the half giant’s eyes were filled with anger. The four of them lifted Hagrid into his hut and onto the bed, facing away from them. Harry calmed down Fang somehow, and Sarah, the memory charm expert of the three, did her work.

## Oblivate

The four of them silently left the hut, and Rob stood discreetly by the window and unfroze Hagrid, who started muttering as if he was having a dream. They stole back up to the castle; the lesson for the week was now done.

"So Dumbledore doesn't know you're here? I would think that he would approve if he did."

"No he wouldn't, Bliss asked him back in November and he rejected the idea. He didn't want any outsiders coming in to teach his children, or so I heard. He doesn't know about your lessons with Bliss and Shepherd, and for the love of Merlin make sure it stays that way."

"What on earth is he thinking? Does he want me to get killed? Bliss is such a good teacher I'm surprised he hasn't fired her."

"He doesn't dare, not with the Board meeting coming up. Afterward? Who can say, maybe he'll become bold again. Ok, time for us to go, and you need to get back to your room. Before we take off.....which one of your friends do you think will win that tournament?" Harry grinned, this was something quite a few people had asked him, not that he'd given out a straight answer to anyone.

"Between the four of us? (They nodded) I'm betting on Neville, though I'll be rooting for my girlfriend of course. Neville has the right combination of power and tactical ability to get it done.....as long as he doesn't have to face 'his' girlfriend at any point, then he'll tank on purpose." The four of them had a nice laugh at that one.

"Interesting, though not unexpected. Frank Longbottom was a great dueler during Auror training, and Alice was pretty good too. See you next week then, don't bring Neville with you, we'll do the Apparition practice the following week."

"Goodnight guys, and thanks again for doing this." He took out a skeleton portkey and tapped it with his wand.

"Harry's trunk (another tap), Activate!" He disappeared, followed soon by Travis, Sarah, and Rob.

The next night's lesson was interesting, as more outside help was brought in for Harry, in the person of Shepherd's own martial arts instructor. John Yamura, age thirty-nine, was one of the relatively few muggles in Britain who was in the know about the entire wizarding world; his sister was a muggleborn witch who had graduated from Hogwarts two years before Harry began there. Yamura was expert in both judo and karate, and was there to test Harry in the judo training he'd been learning from Shepherd. This made him pretty nervous, as he'd not even had a dozen lessons so far, but Yamura put him immediately at ease.

It turned out that Shepherd was a pretty good instructor in both Potions and judo, as John had nothing but praise for what his student had taught Harry. The two of them showed Harry a few more moves, and he seemed to pick them up pretty quickly, though the lesson itself was two and a half hours long. Of course he wasn't going to be entering any judo tournaments anytime soon, but the personalized instruction, combined with his own efforts to be in very good physical condition, was advancing him beyond kids who had studied the sport far longer. He made a deal with Yamura to come once a week and take over his lessons on Shepherd's night to do it. Part of the reasoning was that Shepherd needed more time with his own work, which was soon to include making the Wolfsbane potion for the trust, as he had readily agreed when Harry approached him on Sunday at dinner. He had gotten the owl of course from Fortrap, but had waited to decide until he talked with Harry about it. He also was setting up OWL and NEWT tutoring sessions for those who needed them, figuring that four and six years of Snape's 'teaching' respectively, had left a lot of students ill prepared for those exams.

This was another clandestine arrangement, as Shepherd confirmed that Dumbledore wasn't too keen on outside instruction for his students, especially from muggles. Yamura lived a block away from his sister and her family, and could use her floo to go right into Shepherd's office. Harry took to John right away; there was a sense of calm about him that fit the stereotypical picture of a martial arts master (think Mr. Miyagi, except that martial arts instruction was

Yamura's full time job). He had seen enough martial arts movies to be excited about learning some of those moves, and Yamura (who had taken to Harry as well) had promised him a chance to learn some karate as well. Shepherd assured him that this would be useful in the war, as he might find himself in another situation where he didn't have his wand.

Sunday, January 10th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

3:00 pm

"Now everybody, we're not going to prepare for the dueling tournament here specifically, but we are going to work on a few techniques that you all can use during it."

"Why aren't we going to work on dueling? Isn't that the whole point of the DA?" This was Tom McEwan, a Hufflepuff fourth year.

"Yes it is, in a sense.....but I'm technically impartial as to the tournament and I'm only going to show you general things. You're all making good progress as a group, and I want you all to enter that tournament and do well.....and anyone in here who loses to a non-member is in big trouble. Now, on to this week's lesson: dodging. The best defense to a spell is to not be there when it hits. Now, I want the seventh year boys on one side of the room, and the sixth year boys on the other side, we're going to have a little demonstration." Once the said groups were in place, he took out four medium size balls, about 2/3 the size of footballs and gave them to four of the sixth year students.

"Now, this game is called Dodgeball, and I understand it's a big deal in muggle primary schools in the US. The name of the game is the object of the game: dodge the ball. Sixth years, you can start off, whip those suckers as hard as you can at the other side.....seventh years, don't get hit. If you do, you're out of the game, and if you manage to get one of the balls, don't hesitate to fire it back. The last one who survives gets some Honeydukes' chocolate." He moved off to the

side of the room, and made sure that everyone else was reasonably out of harms way.

“Fire!”

The game commenced as Ron, the biggest of the sixth years, clobbered Andrew Kirke from a range of seven meters. The other sixth years took the example and fired off their own shots, hitting three others. It was now eleven students (sixth years) against five, and the seventh years were stunned. They rallied though, and over the course of several more volleys managed to get it down to seven to three. Eventually though, the superior numbers wore them down, and Justin, Dean, and Stephen Cornfoot were the ones left standing. Harry snickered at Ron as he passed by.

“You’re just too tall a target mate.” Ron just shook his head at this muggle business, but it had been a lot of fun.

The games went on in the same manner, pitting sixth against seventh, fourth against fifth, and the entire third against Harry, Luna, Ron, Neville, and Ginny. All told, twenty of the students avoided getting hit.....and Ron, Neville, and Luna got hit twice each (Luna being no athlete, though she did last longer than most both times).

“Good job everyone, I haven’t decided if we’ll do something like this next time, but count on at least one more set of games sometime. Also, next time will be the last meeting until the tournament reaches its end stages. The following meeting will be on the second weekend of the first round of the tournament, and there certainly won’t be a meeting that day, I’ll have to see about the scheduled meeting after that, when the tournament will be at sixty-four participants left. Either way you’ll be notified by your coordinators. Have a good night.”

The students all left, and Harry assured those of the executive council that asked him that there would be meetings every week that there was supposed to be, though a couple would have to take place at night.

Thursday, January 15th, 1997

Gryffindor Tower, sixth year boys' room

10:00 am

Eventually, Dumbledore couldn't control his curiosity and decided to pay a visit to Harry's room, where Nearly Headless Nick had told him that the pensieve was. He didn't find it strange that Harry wouldn't put it in his trunk, since he probably wanted easy access to it and trusted his roommates implicitly. Dumbledore didn't know about the full features of the trunk, only that it was an Anthony Hook made product and had a security system like all of Hook's trunks did.

He did it while the students were in their morning classes, and easily found the pensieve in the large drawer of Harry's nightstand. He did a scan for routine charms in the room, and only found the charms that he himself had placed.....a big mistake, if he'd done a more thorough, advanced scan, he would have picked up the damping field in the top left corner in the room that held the video camera. The trick with the camera is that it was self contained, with the tape right there inside it, there were no wires and no hub that might be more detectable. Harry changed the tapes each day, and only ran it when he and the others were at class, which had done the trick with convincing Seamus and Dean to go along with the plan. Dobby or Winky would fast forward through the tape while everyone was at dinner and report back.....though thus far there had been nothing to report.

A simple Alohomora took the pensieve out of the locked cabinet and he then checked it for alarm charms, but didn't find any. After looking around once more, he tapped his wand on the pensieve and muttered the spell to project the images, as he didn't want to risk another trap. The image he saw was of Harry sitting on a couch in what was clearly The Burrow.....wait a minute, Harry's face wouldn't be in his own pensieve would it? This was clearly someone else's memory.

"Hello Dumbledore, I see that you couldn't resist taking a peek at my pensieve. How did I know that you knew about it? Well that's my little secret, though I found out that your lapdog Tonks told you about it within minutes of it happening. Before you view the rest of the memories in here, you'll have to listen to what I have to say. You're

obsession with me is reaching scary proportions you know; I would have thought that the Snape meeting would have showed you that others join me in that perception. Now I know you feel that I'm some final weapon, and that I need to live in a gilded jail cell or something.....but that's not going to happen. I keep telling you this, but you just won't listen. Now you invade my privacy for reasons that I'm sure no one would think important, except for you."

"I respected you for so long, yet my entire childhood has been a lie, thanks to you. You kept me isolated for ten years in Surrey, and then did your best to maintain that here. Do you realize that for my first four years I had only two real friends among the students? That's your doing old man, since you did your best not to quash me being thought of as the Heir of Slytherin, an egocentric publicity hound, or Umbridge's favorite target. That doesn't begin to address your lack of decent Defense teachers.....did you really think that Lockhart was the best person available for the job? Or were you blinded by his press clippings and wanted one less thing on your mind? And Remus.....poor Remus, you certainly jerked him around enough didn't you?"

"How about Snape? Did it ever once occur to you to put the guy under Veritaserum, if only to just make sure? You were told time and time again of people's suspicions of him, yet you either ignored them, or just blithely thought that you knew best. Now so many good people are dead, and the fight against Voldemort is now that much more difficult. You've been proven wrong about me time and time again, yet you won't admit defeat. You may define that as perseverance, but I define it as the beginnings of senility. I'll leave you with this parting thought: Don't be trying to set me up as the next Dark Lord, I won't have it, I won't become it, and trust me when I tell you that I won't tolerate it. You have been warned."

"Now on to the rest of the show.....oh yeah, I lied before, there are no other memories. If there were I'd protect them a little better than a simple lock that a first year could open. Thank you for playing old man, I'll be seeing you." The memory ended there, and faded on its own back into the pensieve. Dumbledore wasn't upset at Harry as much as he was with himself, he should have known this went too easily at the beginning. He left the room in a pensive mood (no pun

intended) and went about with the rest of his day. There were no immediate repercussions, and he soon pushed it to the back of his mind, where it would stay for about twenty-four hours.

Friday, January 17th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Lunchtime

Harry and Neville walked up to the teachers' table at the start of the lunch period, fingers mentally crossed that this would come off like they wanted.

"Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Professor Bliss, could you come with us for a moment? We've had a situation develop in Gryffindor Tower that you need to see to."

"What's going on Harry?"

"Just please come with us ma'am.....I mean no one is hurt or anything, but you need to see this, all three of you." The three adults looked at each other and shrugged, though Bliss suspected something sneaky was about to happen. They followed the two boys back to the Gryffindor Common Room, where Ron and Ginny were waiting for them.....they had been setting up the television and the VCR. Harry now lost his innocent look and stared hard at Dumbledore.

"I wanted multiple witnesses when I showed you this Headmaster; we've prepared a special show for you." With that, he pushed play on the VCR.

The pensieve incident from the day before was shown in its entirety, which really was less than ten minutes. There was no question about what Dumbledore was doing, and the other two teachers looked very upset. Dumbledore looked defeated, much as he had the night Snape confessed.

"How did you accomplish this little trap Harry?"

"I broke not one school rule in doing so, and that's all you need to know. A magician never reveals his secrets. That said, I'd like you to point out the school rule that permits you to violate my pensieve."

McGonagall answered for him.

"There is no school rule that says he can or can't.....but Albus what were you thinking? Why did you see the need to do that?"

"I wanted to find out what happened to Severus, I know he didn't just escape."

"Yes he did Headmaster, that's the official story and we're sticking to it whether you believe it or not. Why you continue to care about that man defies all reason. Anyway, back to the subject at hand: Rule or not, you look bad doing what you did, and we have incontrovertible evidence of it.....and we have copies, so don't whip out your wand and destroy anything. I'm open to suggestions about what to do about it....and forgetting about it is not an option."

"You must have something in mind Harry, why don't you share it with us." This was McGonagall.

"Well I would prefer not to use it tomorrow at the Board of Governors Meeting; believe it or not I don't want you fired Headmaster. That said, I don't want something like this to happen again. I want to know that as long as I don't break school rules, my things will remain my things. I wanted witnesses here today, because it was proven last month that you don't honor your deals, and I was sure we would make one today." Bliss looked exasperated.

"Do we want to know how many people have seen this footage?"

"Just those of us in this room, plus Dean and Seamus, since it was their room you violated as well. Headmaster, I think you should say something here."

"Well I have to admit I'm done underestimating you Harry, I should have seen that coming, I should have." He sighed. "I give up Harry, I'm willing to swear any oath you need to hear that I won't interfere

with your life again.....with your own caveat that you don't break any school rules." Ron and Neville looked as though this wasn't nearly good enough, but Harry had a satisfied smile on his face.

"Fair enough.....Do you Albus Dumbledore, in front of these five witnesses, swear a Wizard's Oath that you will not interfere in my private life and violate my privacy for as long as I'm a student at Hogwarts?"

"I, Albus Dumbledore, so swear it."

"Glad to hear it, and in exchange for that oath I won't show my little short film to the Board tomorrow, nor will I release stills of it to any of the newspapers.....as long as you keep to your word this time. I'll promise you one more thing: you break your word this time, I'll do everything I can to bury you, both here at Hogwarts and in the rest of our world."

"I understand Harry.....I know when I'm beaten. Now if you'll excuse me, I would like to go finish my lunch." Without another word he left the room. McGonagall looked set to follow him, but had a parting shot:

"Ten points to Gryffindor for not making a spectacle of that Harry.....if you had shown it right in the Great Hall during lunchtime I wouldn't have blamed you." She left too, leaving only the four students and Bliss.

"So where did you put the camera? That was a nice touch, not putting any alarm charms on it."

"It was high up on the wall, in a shadow. Only if you really knew where to look for it could you see it. It's not there any more, just in case he goes investigating."

"You said that only we had seen it.....but you didn't promise to keep that number so small, did you?

"I must have forgotten to. Do you think he'll keep his word?"

"Of course not, he'll just see it as another promise made under duress, like his Snape one. Are you really prepared to burn him down if he breaks his oath?"

"In a heartbeat, I'm tired of this crap." They went off to lunch, hoping that no more fireworks happened today.

Saturday, January 18th, 1997

Hogwarts Formal Conference Room

10 am

The first order of business at Board of Governors Meeting was to appoint a twelfth member, to replace the now disgraced Magdalena Edgecombe. There were a couple of names thrown around during the half hour discussion, including Bill Weasley's (despite the fact that one of the main criteria was having at least one child who was, or had been, attending Hogwarts), but eventually a woman named Patricia Williams was selected, the feeling of some of the members being that the equal male/female ratio should be maintained. Williams was one of the owners of Flourish and Blotts, and her oldest grandchild was four years away from starting Hogwarts. Williams was summoned via floo, and took her place at the table (a few candidates had been sounded out and told to remain available).

Emma Fogg invited in Bill Weasley (who never thought he had a chance at being named at the Board) and introduced him as the new head of The Order of the Phoenix. Bill gave a brief synopsis of what the new Order was hoping to accomplish. He was asked some gentle questions about the deaths of his parents and of Remus Lupin as well, and about the interrogation of Snape. Dumbledore was not in the room to hear any of this, though he could imagine what Bill was telling them. After hearing all of this, the Board took an hour and debated the fate of Albus Dumbledore. They were pretty torqued about the idea of Snape living in Dumbledore's office, where the sneaky man had access to the entire school.....and most of the wizarding world, via Dumbledore's private floo.

Without giving details of what she had said at the ouster meeting, Bill had told them that Professor McGonagall had willingly voted to remove Dumbledore from leadership of the Order, in an effort to show that she wasn't the old man's tool, and could be trusted again with the school (as she had been four years ago). She was brought in, asked for her recollection of the ouster meeting, and then queried:

"If the Board decides on the immediate dismissal of Headmaster Dumbledore, are you willing to again take on the post? It would not be on an interim basis this time; you would have the post on a permanent basis."

"I should tell the Board that the middle of the school year is probably not the best time to change Headmasters, and it would not be an easy thing to find another Transfiguration teacher on such short notice. Therefore I urge you to wait until the end of June to make a change, if that's the decision that you make. That said, I would accept the post under whichever circumstances you offer it to me. My sole concern is the student body of this school, and what is best for them."

"Has Albus lost your confidence as Headmaster?"

"He has lost some of it, yes. However it is nothing that isn't irretrievable, if he is given a chance."

"Has he lost the confidence of the students?" This was a stickier wicket, since he more or less had.

"If I'm to be honest with you.....most of the students, and all of the anti-Voldemort ones, will do what Mr. Potter advises them. I know Mr. Potter has told me personally that he doesn't want Professor Dumbledore to be fired, and the students will follow his lead. The pro-Voldemort students of course hate the Headmaster and always have."

"Thank you for your honesty Professor McGonagall, if a change is made you will be informed immediately." McGonagall took her leave. There was more debate after Harry had his say, and what he said gave them a lot of pause.

"I think he should be advised to retire at the end of the school year, and Professor McGonagall be given the post then. I imagine she told you that changing the job mid-year is problematic, and I agree. It will cause unnecessary upheaval amongst the students and give comfort to Voldemort and his minions." This caused a lot of interested muttering amongst the Board members as they listened to it. As promised, he didn't tell them about the pensieve, and hoped that Blaise's father and Daphne's uncle wouldn't too upset with him when they heard about it.

"Has the Headmaster lost the confidence of the students Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, I think he has to a point, though he hasn't completely lost their respect."

"Thank you for your candor Mr. Potter, and for your forbearance.....I know I personally expected you to be much harsher in your views."

"I'm always available to the Board, at its pleasure." He left the room and exchanged enigmatic looks with Dumbledore, who was coming toward the conference room.

"I kept my end of the deal, don't worry." The old man didn't say a word, but nodded his head.

It turned out though, that Dumbledore was not allowed to state his case, as they had heard enough out of him over the months. When he was brought in, fifteen minutes after Harry's departure, the decision was already made. Emma Fogg delivered the verdict.

"Albus Dumbledore, we honor your long record of service to both this school and to the wizarding world in general. We have passed a motion, unanimously, which requests that in June you announce your retirement from Hogwarts." Dumbledore looked a bit shocked, though it might have been from the fact that he wasn't being terminated right on the spot.

"Retire, or I will be retired?"

"Something like that, yes. It has become apparent over the last few years that you have lost your touch, and some of your perspective. Housing Snape in your office was the 'Final Straw', and it was the final misjudgment." The old man didn't seem in the frame of mind to argue with the decision; most of the Board had never seen him look so tired.

"Very well, I will do as the Board wishes. When would you like me to make the announcement?"

"We feel that right after the Quidditch exhibition would be a good time.....though we will inform Professor McGonagall immediately, as she is to be your replacement. She will also run the search for her own replacement as Transfiguration teacher. The issue of who will be Deputy will be resolved sometime in the spring, in consultation with Professor McGonagall."

"Minerva will do an excellent job." He remained in the room, as the only order of business left was to talk about the Dueling Tournament, the details of which Professor Bliss took them through. She made a point of inviting them all to the final weekend, with the teacher tournament and the final student duel.

After the meeting was over, Manuel Zabini made the walk to the Slytherin Common Room to spend some time with his son.....being a Board member has its privileges. He informed his son of what happened at the meeting, knowing full well what would happen next. Before they left the Common Room, he had a brief moment with Theo Nott, whispering quietly to him. After sharing lunch with Blaise and Daphne at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, he said his goodbyes, winking at Harry on the way out. Once lunch was over, Blaise and Daphne ambled out the door of the Great Hall, before rendezvousing with Harry and the others in Dungeon Seven. Blaise looked very eager to share his news:

"He's done folks; the old man retires in June." The smiles on the faces of everyone in the room were all the comments needed.

Author's Notes: A reviewer very cleverly pointed out that if Snape had been living in Dumbledore's office, he should have shown up on the Marauders Map. Now I could tell you that it was just dumb luck that Harry and other Map watchers didn't see Snape.....but honesty it's a detail that just never occurred to me. Also, Peter Pettigrew has some more dialogue in this chapter, and while the Timothy Spall performance in movie three had its merits, it's not the basis for how I'm portraying our boy Wormtail. Oh, I doubt many armies in the modern world require the skills I talk about at the end of the chapter; it's just a quirk I'm putting in there.

Saturday, January 18th, 1997 (continued)

"So the Board took my idea eh? That's what I suggested to them."

"Yes they did, dad said that it was either going to be your idea or that he be fired immediately, there was no mention of him staying around beyond June."

"They're giving the gig to McGonagall?"

"They are, though I think they're just now telling her. She told them that she would take the job under whatever circumstances offered.....so I think she's pretty eager for the job. I would expect a lot of changes next year, I bet she's secretly been chafing under Dumbledore lately." Manuel shared pretty much everything he learned at these meetings with his three sons (Henri and Pascal as well), so Blaise's inside information was nothing new. Ron had a question:

"I wonder who'll be Deputy now. Flitwick? Maybe Sprout?" Everyone looked to Blaise and Daphne, and she answered.

"Uncle Philip says that they prefer the Head and Deputy to be opposite genders, to maintain a balance. For instance, Dumbledore wasn't Deputy under Dippet, he was simply the senior teacher. I'm betting on Flitwick, unless he turns it down, then they'll probably offer it to Vector or Hill, though they prefer it to be a Head of House. I'm betting McGonagall will put a lot of pressure to bear on Flitwick if he seems reluctant." Neville had an opinion on that one:

"Hill would be hilarious as Deputy, he's as close a thing to being a squib as anyone in the school not named Filch. He's a great teacher, and he certainly dislikes Dumbledore, but he really thinks more like a muggle than a wizard, I can't see McGonagall leaning too hard on him.....though she might have to now that I think about it, he's the only other member of the staff to be a Gryffindor alumnus I think.....Harry, what was Hagrid?"

"He was a Gryffindor too; that would be funny, the two of the three least magical professors, let's not forget Trelawney, competing to be Head of Gryffindor. Who knows what McGonagall will be looking for in a Deputy; hopefully it won't be a yes man/woman. Maybe she'll concentrate on hiring a Gryffindor alum to replace her in Transfiguration and make that person Head of Gryffindor, just like they did with Shepherd and Potions.....we can all agree that the old meddler didn't botch that appointment." Vigorous nodding of the heads from the three Slytherins in particular, and Ron as well, who had quite taken to Shepherd, and was constantly ragging on Harry for not taking Potions this year. Harry's standard reply had gotten to be 'I don't care if Luna was teaching Potions in a bikini, I still wouldn't take it'.

There wasn't much more conversation, as the Quidditch players amongst them were going to attempt to play a pickup game on the pitch. This would be the first game of the New Year, as the cold had died down somewhat and the wind wasn't too bad. Harry and Blaise hung back a bit.

"What's the news with Theo Nott? Has he decided anything?"

"Well I talked him into playing in the pickup game today, and he seems to be leaning toward us. The other side in Slytherin is now pretty disorganized; no real leader has taken over."

"Let's hope it stays that way. Do you believe he's sincere?"

"I don't know Harry, but I think it's worth the risk.....but I think we should have him sign the parchment whether we put him in the executive council or not."

"That's where I want him; he'll have a lot of insight for us there."

"How are you going to sell that to the Creeveys? You didn't let Granger back in, not that I'm complaining mind you, but they'll think that she deserves to be in more than Theo does."

"I did a private canvass of the rest of Exec council over the last couple of weeks, all individually during classes except for Cho and Katie, and every single one of them backed me on what I said to the Creeveys.....and I gave them every opportunity to disagree with me. They'll go along with this one too, especially since I need Theo to sign the parchment before I'm even remotely comfortable allying with him."

"What exactly does that thing do?"

"Bill won't tell me, only that it's heinous and borderline illegal. Back to the Creeveys.....I'll trade them to get Theo if I have to. Tell me something: let's say Theo turns.....couple that with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle leaving.....could you win a fight in Slytherin right now?"

"Only if we got the drop on them and fired first. Those seventh years aren't the most talented magically, but they are vicious and ruthless, and too many of our supporters are the young kids. Next year we would win in a walk, but this year? I think we have to come up with a plan for neutralizing them, especially if our invasion fears come true."

"We'll have to think about that, let's wait and see what Theo would have to say on it, if we get him."

They headed out, as Harry went back upstairs to get his broom, and Blaise made the short walk back to his Common Room.

The game went swimmingly, as there were enough players that there were two full squads on each side, so that half the players could be keeping warm next a number of campfires that had sprung up along the bottom of the field, where a lot of spectators were huddled as well, toasting marshmallows, muggle style. Few Slytherins ever played in these games, so Nott's appearance caused some murmurs, but

nothing too bad, as the leaders of the teams knew that Blaise, and by extension Harry, was wooing him to switch alliances. Harry didn't want to make it too obvious or uncomfortable for Nott, but made a point to choose him for his team (the 'captains' of each side rotated, as not everyone played each time out). He and Theo exchanged friendly words, and Nott could be seen during his breaks from play at a campfire with Daphne, Tracey and Blaise.

The DA meeting the next day was nothing but a review of all they had done over the five months. Despite numerous pleas, especially from the third and fourth year students, Harry would not do any practice duels. He said it wouldn't be fair to any of the participants, since it would show their hands in advance of the competition. He also declined to do any duels himself, since he knew he didn't want to advertise his own skills either.....just in case there was a weed or two in their garden. He assumed that at least a couple of the members of the large DA were pro-Dark students that slipped in.....and that was a big downside to such a large group. All in all Harry was pleased with how the DA was progressing, but he knew that it wasn't all it could be. If he had it do over, he felt he would have capped membership at sixty or so, and put those people to the parchment test as well. Right now, if Voldemort attacked Hogwarts or Hogsmeade, he could only really count on the executive council, plus a few others like Hermione and Sloper, to defend the other students. The rest of the DA would follow orders of course, and there was something to be said for that.....especially when you're talking about teenagers. The executive council though, was working far better than he could ever have hoped for, as peoples' skills were being showcased in new and interesting ways.

After the meeting, Theo Nott approached Harry and his group as most of the others went on their way. Theo hadn't been at the meeting, since Harry had closed off membership because of the tournament, but the entire school knew when the meetings were held. He looked nervous as he walked up to them, though Blaise had assured him that all he had to do was say 'yes'. He hadn't told him about the parchment that would need to be signed, because of course one of the features of the parchment is that you can't tell outsiders about it. There were about ten people still around Harry by now, including Tracey, Blaise, and Daphne.

"All right Harry, I'm in.....with a few conditions." Eyebrows raised, but no one said anything, preferring to let Harry deal with it.

"We're listening."

"First: I will not be a spy, and I won't go running to my father to try and set him up in a trap. Agreed?" Harry had no intention of sending anyone in as a spy; he didn't want to fall into any Snape traps, so this was an easy one.

"Agreed."

"Next: I'll need somewhere to stay this summer, since I'll be persona non grata with my entire family. Blaise, I know your father hinted as much to me, but now I want you to make it plain."

"It's plain, you'll come back with me for the summer and stay with my family.....and when we graduate, we'll put you to work in the business. Henri and Pascal are both talking about starting families with their girlfriends, so they could use more than just me to help them." House Zabini specialized in 'hard to find' items in the wizarding world, as well as a few other allied businesses.

"Then I'm in, completely in.....oh yeah, one more thing.....Blaise, we need to get you back into the sixth year room, we'll kick Miller out, he snores too much anyway." Blaise laughed at that one, and shook Theo's hand; he was followed in that by Harry. Harry looked around and saw no one other than parchment people, but saw no reason to take any chances.

"Come with us Theo, there's something we need to show you." He led the way to Dungeon Seven, going about twenty paces before realization hit that all he had needed back there was the Map. He called out for Dobby and had him fetch the Map from his trunk. Once he verified that no one was following them (he had trouble believing Tonks' abrupt flip-flop), he continued on down to the hideaway. Theo was suitably flabbergasted that they had been meeting and training not twenty meters from the Slytherin Common Room, all without discovery. Harry explained that the room was under Fidelius, but not

who the secret keeper was.....most people who hadn't been there when the spell was cast thought Harry was the secret keeper, which was just what he wanted when he asked Ron to do it instead.

Once in the room, Harry whipped out the parchment and explained that in order for Theo to officially be part of the executive council, he needed to sign on the dotted line. Theo was one of the few to note something a bit odd; looking over the names he saw it:

"I notice that you haven't signed it."

"Someone needs to be able to tell new people about it, and I am considered trustworthy; so Bill Weasley, the designer of this wonderful tool, exempted himself and me from it.....so we can talk about it. Don't ask me how he did it, he's a Gringotts' Charm Breaker, and knows all kinds of funky stuff. Part of the deal with the parchment is that you can't even tell people about it. The original group all signed this back in July; the only additions since then hang out in your Common Room. I've been resisting additions since the train ride, but I have no trouble making an exception for you." Theo signed the parchment, becoming the thirty-fourth signature on the document (plus Harry and Bill, who were not signatories). He was thanked and congratulated for his decision by the others present.

"Now that you're in, you can only talk about executive council stuff with other members of it, but there are enough of us.....thirty-six now that you're on it I think (he counted the signatures and confirmed it), that you won't be starved for conversation about our matters. Now due to my little tournament edict, you can't come into the main DA until you've been eliminated from the dueling, I can't appear to be a hypocrite..... but that doesn't apply to the council. Speaking of which, Blaise, I want you to come with me to try and soothe over the Creeveys." He explained to Theo a few things about the Hermione situation. Surprisingly Theo said that he didn't care about her one way or the other, and that his vote, if asked for, would be to let her in if that made the brothers Creevey happy. The group went their separate ways soon after, as Nott went to the library, the Ravenclaws back to their Common Room, and the Trio (Ginny had gone off with Anthony), plus the Slytherin trio (Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey) went up to Gryffindor Tower. The six of them quickly found Colin and

Dennis, who thankfully were sans Hermione, who was likely nearby Theo in the library. The brothers were sitting by the fire with their books open, and Colin appeared to be helping Dennis with a Potions essay.

Harry took the easy way out of trying to figure out where to hold this meeting (he wanted no part of having the Creeveys in one of the trunks, where they had never been), so he threw a Muting Charm around the fireplace.

"We need to talk with you two for a minute."

"Sure Harry, what's up?"

"I want you to hear this from me, and I respect you guys enough to feel the need to explain my reasoning to you for what I've just done." If that didn't telegraph it, Harry didn't know what could. He was proven right by Dennis' question:

"Is this about Hermione?"

"Of a sort.....we just inducted Theo Nott into the executive council, he signed the parchment fifteen minutes ago." There was silence as the brothers took this in.

"I thought we weren't adding people, isn't that what you told us not too long ago?"

"I did, and I meant it then.....but this was just too good an opportunity to pass up. It's not every day that we get an older Slytherin to switch sides, in fact it hasn't happened this year." They couldn't deny the logic of this, so Colin immediately started grasping at straws.

"How do you know he's truly turned? He could just be a spy for the other side, I'm sure there are things he can now tell them that the parchment doesn't cover." Blaise handled that one.

"He's turned, I confirmed it yesterday during the pickup Quidditch game when I slipped Veritaserum in his hot cocoa, he answered every question the correct way, he's with us."

"Guys, I've been doing everything I can to woo Slytherin students all year.....this isn't the first exception I've made to allow them more options. I know this seems like I'm being inconsistent, but I have a good reason to be here. The ratio in Slytherin is now 33-27 in our favor, far and away the best it's ever been since I've been here." All four undecided among the youngest two years had eventually declared for Blaise, and Draco and his goons had dropped out.

"Well you do what you want Harry, we know that we have no say." This was a bit petulant, but also very true. Harry wasn't the only one who thought that the two brothers should be on bended knee every day for the chance to be in the council and learn the kinds of spells, tactics, and plans that they were learning. More than one of the people he had canvassed advocated kicking them out if they got mouthy, though he had resisted it so far. On the whole Harry thought that they were taking the news pretty well though.

"Are you two still on board? I would prefer not to gain one while losing two." He felt he should at least go through the motions. Colin and Dennis looked at each other and seemed to come to the same conclusion: they had no choice. They didn't pout, and Harry's respect for them grew a little bit.

"We're on board. We'll be there at the next meeting."

"Good enough, I'm glad to hear it. I want to stress that this isn't about liking or disliking, though he seems to be a decent enough guy.....this is all about strategy, and doing what we can to marginalize the pro-Dark students." The brothers nodded, and everyone went about their business for the rest of the day.

Wednesday, January 22nd, 1997

Somewhere in Greater London

6:00pm

The new Deputy Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department trudged home from another day of handling exploding teapots, and taking orders from that dunce warlock Perkins (Percy's opinion). Percy Weasley was a very intelligent wizard, and was quite aware of how far his career had fallen, from a start of such promise. Perhaps it was a case of being too intelligent, and too cognizant of said intelligence that had brought Percy down. The news of his 'promotion' had come as a major shock, almost goading him into quitting. Fudge had assured him that he needed some responsibility added to his normal workload, and a year or so in the Misuse Department would be a nice experience for him, as well as a way to honor his father. Percy had no wish to honor his father in that, or any other, way.....but slowly faced the reality that he didn't have anywhere to go. Fudge had made it clear that his current and future Ministry career hinged on his doing a good job in his new position, and Percy figured correctly that two and a half years in the Ministry being a gofer would not translate well to the private sector. He had heard rumors of the Zonkos offer for his brothers' business and was astounded that those two losers were now potentially so rich.

This was a recurring thought running through his head as he opened the door to his apartment (thankfully the change in jobs didn't come with a pay decrease).....only to find out that he had two guests, who were making themselves at home on his sofa and easy chair, drinking tea. Peter Pettigrew and Draco Malfoy looked up from their conversation. His old pet rat smiled at him in greeting.

"Hello there Percy, sorry to come in unannounced, but you weren't at home. Have some tea." Percy was no worse at Defense than the rest of his family, having gotten O's in both his OWL and NEWT exams.....but now he was too flummoxed to even take out his wand, which was something his guests were counting on. Draco kept his sarcastic mouth shut, under Voldemort's orders, and let Pettigrew handle the seduction.

"I would ask you to have a seat, but since it's your home that would be quite rude." Percy finally found his voice to ask the obvious.

"What are you two doing here?"

“Our Master, you call him Lord Voldemort, wanted us to stop by and touch base with you, to see if we can reach an accord.” Here it was.....ever since the final split with his family Percy had wondered if this was coming.....and truth be told had been a little insulted that an approach hadn’t been made earlier. He had not been dying to turn Dark mind you, but it would have been nice to know that his services were in demand.

“What kind of accord? You want me to become a Death Eater?”

“Bluntly put, but yes, that’s what we have in mind. Our Master has high regard for what you can bring to the organization.”

“I’m not in the Minister’s confidence anymore you know, I’m now in my father’s old department.”

“We know about that.....well we know everything at the Ministry worth knowing. Did you know that it was Potter who did the dirty deed? He asked Fudge to have you demoted, and our dear Minister couldn’t wait to do his new boss’ bidding.” This didn’t shock Percy like Pettigrew thought it would. The redhead managed to overcome his fear for a moment, long enough to look contemptuous.

“No really? Is that what happened? I figured as much after my parents’ funeral. What are you offering me? And what will I have to do in return?”

“What we’re offering is a place at the table, a place on the winning side. Those who take advantage of these one-time offers now will be greatly rewarded after final victory. I’m not saying you’ll be in the inner council right away, you’ll have to prove yourself first.....but our Master is confident you will measure up.”

“Sounds intriguing.....but what do you want from me in return? I’m doubting that you need more muggle torturers.”

“Well we always need good soldiers, but that’s not what we are after with you Percy. We want to you to be one our inside people in the

Ministry. Losing Magdalena Edgecombe was a blow, but you can help us rebound from that."

"I would have thought that you would want me to spy on my family for you. You need one now that Snape can't be undercover for you anymore."

"Yes, death will hinder that won't it?"

"Death? He escaped according to The Daily Prophet."

"That's not what happened and you know it. At least he didn't escape back to us, and I know Snape well enough to say that he wouldn't just abandon everything he's worked for all of these years. No Percy, he escaped the permanent way, via death. Your family and their pet project Potter killed him. They had a chance to get rid of someone they hated and they took advantage of it." In the back of his mind Percy had always understood this, that his family had killed Snape.....but he just didn't want to believe it. It also made him wonder just how much they hated him, and how far they would go.

"To answer your other question, no we don't want you to spy on your family for us. It seems that Potter and your brother Bill are developing quite a habit of using Veritaserum lately, and I have no doubt that if we sent you in there to dig up dirt for us, some of that very useful potion would wind up in your pumpkin juice. That would make this entire evening a waste of time for all three of us, and we can't be having that now can we? No Percy, what we want is just what I said earlier, to be one of our inside people in the Ministry. Our buddy Fudge isn't about to start using any truth potions, for fear that he'd be drinking some himself." Percy reflexively grabbed his forearm, and Pettigrew knew just what he was thinking.

"Did I mention that we won't require you to take the Dark Mark? (Percy goggled at hearing that) It would be just a bit too obvious if someone were to start making checks of all Ministry employees.....doesn't take much effort to make someone roll up their sleeve. They would have caught Magdalena much sooner if they'd thought of that."

“What makes you so sure you’re going to win?”

“Because we know what we’re doing, and we have our Master, the greatest mind and leader our world has ever known. What does the other side have? A bumbling fool of a Minister, a beyond senile Hogwarts Headmaster.....and yes, an admittedly powerful sixteen year old, who is more concerned with petty privileges and settling old scores than with finding a way to win this war. Your parents are dead because Potter didn’t send Snape to Azkaban when he had the chance.....instead he bargained for a little more freedom instead. What a waste.”

“Did Voldemort order Snape to kill my parents?”

“No he did not Percy, you have my word on that. Their deaths came as a surprise to us, and not a pleasant one, since it cost us Snape in the bargain. He killed them on his own, without orders. He was prone to do that you know, Snape and his inner demons were always in their own little private war. Besides, even you will admit that your parents were not major targets. A fussy, loving housewife and a muggle obsessed husband.....why neither of them were as powerful as your weakest sibling. What would be the point in killing them? Remember, I lived with them and you for thirteen years, I had their measure.” Percy took that in for a minute, as Peter and Draco sipped their tea, watching him. Their orders from Voldemort were plain: get Percy’s agreement to join him.....or kill him right then and there. Pettigrew hoped that Percy was smart enough to realize this; the guy really should have had better security on his apartment.

“What happens if I say no?”

“You really need to ask that Percy?” Draco, as per the plan, took out his wand and placed it on the coffee table in front of him. He was still keeping quiet; he didn’t want it getting back to Voldemort that he had disobeyed orders. He had to admit that Pettigrew was doing a good job though, if the man had any contempt for Percy, he was keeping it well hidden.

“Do I have a chance to think about it?”

"Sure, as long as you don't mind us being in the room with you the entire time. We can't have you running off to tattle to your brothers. Let's face it Percy, if the answer was no you would have said it from the off. You haven't even thought about taking your wand out, this is something you've thought about, admit it."

"Of course I've thought about it, ever since your boss returned."

"Then commit Percy, if it makes you feel any better, it's not like you had any choice in the matter.....a pensieve memory from either Draco or I would be very damaging to you, if put into the wrong hands. Sorry Percy, but you've hesitated a bit too much to walk away from this, even if you were to pretend to join us, and then turned." Percy acknowledged that with a nod, he knew both that he could never fight his way out of this right now, nor realistically combat the blackmail that these two now held over him. The idea that all he had to do to get back with his family was apologize never occurred to him.....he had nowhere else to go.

"What if I do say yes? What happens then?" Peter smiled; this was in the bag now. While he didn't mind the idea of killing his former keeper, he much preferred to have a new recruit in the fold. If there was one thing the Death Eaters needed, it was more members.

"Are you saying yes Percy? No more beating about the bush, Draco and I need an answer."

"Yes, I'll join you."

"Good, you made the right choice. Now, Draco and I will leave you to your evening, we have a couple more errands to take care of for our Master. We'll be in touch in a few days with your first assignment, welcome aboard." Pettigrew reached out his hand, and Percy shook.....he was now committed. Reflexively, Percy also reached to shake Draco's hand, and the young blonde reciprocated.

"Welcome to the club Weasley, in a few months time your brothers and sister will be begging you for forgiveness." Percy smiled, that was a good image. The two Death Eaters Apparated away, leaving Percy alone with his thoughts.

Friday, January 24th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Lunchtime

Lunch was going on as normal, until Professor Bliss stood up and put Sonorus on her voice.

"I would like to announce that tomorrow there will be fourteen dueling matches to determine the final 256 entrants into the Dueling Tournament. Of the school's 276 students, all but six have entered.....necessitating twenty-eight students to square off for fourteen spots. Now all of the 'play-in' matches, as I believe muggle sports call them, will involve first year students, and they have already been told. Eight winners of the play-in matches will face off against our eight seeded students in the first round, while the other six will go straight into the blind draw.....and I stress that it will be blind, anyone could face anyone, except for the eight seeds, who will only face each other in the quarterfinals. The matches will begin at 2:00 pm here in the Great Hall, and should be completed before dinner time. Any questions, see me or Professor Flitwick.....oh yes, I almost forgot. I will be the referee during most of the matches, but to make sure that there are no House biases involved, I will step aside during matches involving Hufflepuff, Professor Shepherd will take my place, unless the duel involves a Slytherin, in which case Professor Flitwick will take over. A bit much I'll acknowledge, but we feel that the appearance of fairness is just as essential to actual fairness. Thank you." She sat back down, and most of the eyes turned, for once, to the first years.....most of whom would the afternoon's entertainment the next day. None of them really looked nervous, as they had been told in their last Defense class that they would be dueling on Saturday, and had been preparing accordingly.

Saturday, January 25, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

2:00 pm

The first match of the play-in round was Holly Simpson of Hufflepuff versus Daniel Garcia of Gryffindor, with Professor Shepherd being the referee. The match was contested in front of about 100 people or so, including all eight of the seeded students, one of whom might have to face the winner in the next round. The Great Hall had been cleared of tables, and attendance was standing room only. There was no dueling platform, as the organizers wanted more room for the contestants. To ensure that no one in the audience got hit with a stray spell, all of the spectators were told to duck, as no magical barriers would be used, just a three foot high wooden wall that surrounded the competition floor. The combatants began by facing one another at a distance of ten meters, and could advance or retreat anywhere within the boundaries of the wooden walls. Teachers were stationed every few meters to ensure that no one from the crowd decided to make an 'assist' to one of the competitors (it was deemed impractical to confiscate wands).

The opening duel was a simple one, as Garcia had received a few pointers from, among others: Ron, Neville, and Jack Sloper.....all of whom wanted Gryffindors to win whenever possible. Garcia, who it turned out had just missed the cutoff for being able to skip the play-in round (seventeen of the forty-five first year students did not have to do this round, as chosen by Professors Flitwick and Bliss), made his mark by running right at Simpson, firing spells all the while. This intimidated the Hufflepuff girl so much that she panicked and tried to run away, and only fired one half hearted Expelliarmus at him. Unfortunately for her, Garcia was much quicker, got to within one meter of her, and nailed her with a Stupefy.....a not terribly strong Stupefy, but enough to do the job. The duel had lasted a total of twenty seconds, and the only spell that had connected was the last one.....which was the plan. Daniel was congratulated by all the Gryffindors in attendance as he left the floor.

Harry was waiting for him, "Nice job Daniel, that had Ron written all over it." The first year grinned, it really was a relief being able to go first and get it over with. It didn't hurt that he was facing a girl that had wanted little part of being in the tournament. There had been some quiet criticism of the tournament at the last Prefects meeting, as a few first, and even some second year, students had been complaining

about the mandatory nature of tournament participation. They felt that it was a given that only a sixth or seventh year was going to win, and why should they go through the motions of competing when they knew they didn't have a chance at ultimate victory. The rumblings were loud enough that the Head Boy and Girl were sent to talk with Bliss about it. She pointed out that it was for a class assignment, and that the experience would be valuable enough without chance of victory.....especially given that the tournament was going to be an annual event.

Bliss then talked with her first and second year classes about it and did her best to smooth over any fears they might have. She pointed out that with Harry out of the competition, there really was no hard and fast favorite, and that anything could happen. This did little to soothe some of the fears though, and a few letters came in from parents, criticizing the faculty for deliberately putting their children in the path of Stupefy spells when it wasn't necessary. Privately, Bliss told Charles that this was yet another instance of people putting their heads in the sand for no good reason, children needed to learn what might be out there, and better that they face their first Stupefy in a controlled environment. There were times when she felt sorry for Harry because of this, having to put his life on the line to protect people like that.

The rest of the play-in round was notable for its randomness. Four of the remaining duels also were one-shot affairs, as Daniel's example was followed by the more daring.....including one where both students rushed forward and almost crashed heads, before one of them managed a lucky hit. The strangest duel was contested by two Ravenclaw first years, Marissa Ryan and Julie Winchell, who were roommates and friends and didn't seem all that interested in hurting each other..... so they dueled for ten minutes by lobbing softball spells at each other from fifteen meters away. Finally Marissa lost her concentration and was hit with a tickling charm, and Julie finally gave in to the very loud urging of the crowd and got close enough to put her away. Notable overall was that not one student surrendered, which was an option.....though not likely one that would endear the quitter to his/her peers.

The round ended at 3:30, and all of the students were informed that the official first round would begin at the same time the next Saturday. All four Gryffindors who had fought had won their matches, and a small party was thrown in the Tower that night to congratulate them, and hopefully give them another shot of confidence.

Sunday, January 26th, 1997

Harry introduced Theo to the rest of the executive council with a little nervousness; though he wasn't nearly as apprehensive as Theo.....who had now 'outed' himself, and could not go back to his old gang. Everyone knew of the change of course, there had been much buzz about it all over school. People from the council had been coming up to him in classes and encouraging him, telling him that he had made the right choice. Theo was a quiet, introspective young man who had not felt very comfortable tormenting other people.....so the encouragement meant a lot to him. He knew that Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey had helped scout the trail for him back in September.....and he doubted he could have been the first to defect.

One of the only tangible repercussions on him so far had been being kicked off the Slytherin Quidditch team by new captain Sean Touchet, who had been appointed largely to keep the pro-Dark Slytherins somewhat quiet. Shepherd had made the appointment based strictly on seniority, or so he said. He knew that it meant having an all pro-Dark lineup again, and probably not a very good team either, since their three best players were now fugitives.....but that was the price he was willing to pay to keep his House violence free. Touchet actually hadn't been preemptive about kicking Theo off either, he had gone to Shepherd and calmly explained his reasoning and his plans to fill the spot (the other three spots had been filled through an interview process, as the Slytherins had had no reserve team). Touchet felt that given the split within Slytherin, the team should either be entirely pro-light, or entirely pro-Dark, not a potentially combustible mixture of the two. Shepherd happened to agree with this assessment, and reasoned that it was just too late to get a competing team that was made up of Blaise's allies together to decide who would be the Slytherin team. Touchet left their meeting reassured that their Head of House wasn't totally against his side, and seemed to respond well to cold facts and logic.....something

that Shepherd tried hard to do, so that the three dozen odd pro-Dark students did not tune him out completely. He assumed that there would be some kind of fight eventually, and wanted to forestall that long enough so that Blaise could get his people better trained.

The other, and entirely expected, repercussion, was the number of Howlers sent to Theo by members of his family.....there wound up being about ten of them, from various relatives. Eventually Theo had to give the envelopes to one of the staff House Elves for disposal. He never wavered in his decision though, even when the letter came from his mother, disinheriting him (the Notts weren't terribly wealthy, but they were definitely upper class for wizards). His former allies contented themselves with a few insults here and there, but nothing violent had happened. There had been one fight, back in early December, and Shepherd had harshly punished the offenders, a pair of fifth year boys, giving them ten detentions each, and banning them from the next Hogsmeade visit.....which was due to happen in late February. This punishment helped dissuade anyone else from starting a fight, as Shepherd said that the punishment for the first two boys would be doubled for anyone who didn't understand the lesson.

The meeting went on as expected, dealing with advanced team tactics for what was their prime area of research and discussion lately: defense of the castle in case of attack. There had also been some Hogsmeade scenarios worked on as well, and Winky was in the process of doing a detailed map of the town, which hopefully would be completed with a week or so. Voldemort had been pretty quiet again, with no suspicious deaths being reported, either of wizards/witches or of muggles. The prevailing theory among the council and the Order both was that the Death Eaters were doing some hardcore recruiting and training. The worry was that Hogsmeade and Hogwarts were just too tempting as potential targets. Harry had Theo working with his own group, the better to get him up to speed. Once he was, he would join his three Slytherin compatriots in their team. This was one area where Harry kept the House members in the council with their own, just in case an attack at Hogwarts came at night, with everyone in their own dormitories. Harry's own group was himself, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Katie. The other Gryffindor group was Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, and the Creevey brothers. Ravenclaw was also split into two groups,

while Hufflepuff and Slytherin were small enough in the council to need only one group each. The leaders of the groups were responsible for mobilizing the rest of the DA and other capable students, as well as seeing to the safety of the first and second year students.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

6:00 pm

Peter Pettigrew had had a good week, successfully recruiting three new Death Eaters within the Ministry, Percy Weasley and two other middle ranking officials (one in the Department of International Magical Cooperation and the other in the Department of Magical Games and Sports). None of the new recruits was valuable in and of themselves, but it was always good to rack up numbers, and to think long-term. Draco was currently out beating the bushes among more recent Slytherins, throwing some of that Malfoy money around. True to previous form, the goblins had no official position on the war, and let anyone who had a Gringotts vault use it.....other than Voldemort, who was simply too large a target to tolerate. Many a Dark wizard had long tried to come up with the perfect plan to rob Gringotts, but it never seriously got into the planning stages. Voldemort had promised his troops at the last large gathering that he would consider a heist once Potter and Dumbledore were taken care of.

Pettigrew hadn't seen his master in over a week now, though he had been keeping him apprised of developments via owls.

"Greetings Peter, I hear you've been quite the successful seduction artist this week."

"I have my moments Master, thank you. The promise of wealth and power did most of the work for me."

"How did young Malfoy perform? Did he follow his instructions?"

"Yes Master, he did what he was required to do. Interesting that after using his two idiots for so long, he would be reduced to being the 'muscle' on assignments like that."

"It is one way of making sure he knows his place. I'm not sure what future Draco has with us, it will interesting to see how he can keep his ego in check, even if he would not dare to say 'boo' to me. Tell me now, what of our approaches to some of the Aurors or Unspeakables, surely one or two of them must be willing to turn."

"The problem is a matter of how to best make the first contact. We need someone from outside normal channels, and one who isn't subject to arrest if seen in the right places. I don't dare show my face around any of the Aurors, at least not without considerable backup, neither does Bella or even Draco. We either need some more Polyjuice to be bought or prepared, or we need an outside ringer to be our 'representative' in the more dangerous situations."

"True, very true. Losing Snape was quite a blow to our potions supply; we're going to need a new Potions Master, that's for sure. We might just have to do without a presence in those departments for the time being.....or we'll just have to continue killing them off. What of the new training programs?"

"They're not scheduled to begin until July, until then they've borrowed a handful of Aurors from Australia and Canada, as well as called back some retired ones to do some part-time work. Things are very quiet abroad, and the Ministries there can spare the troops, there being no equivalent of you to deal with. Word is, some of the entrance standards to the Auror training will be relaxed, and they'll be recruiting heavily at Hogwarts this spring, to attempt to replenish their numbers. The seventh year class this year at Hogwarts is not considered a strong one for Defense and Charms, I imagine the Ministry is praying that they can hold out another year until the mother lode hits and Potter's class graduates, I'm betting they can get twenty or thirty Aurors just out of that group."

"Potter will never go to work directly for Fudge; our beloved Minister just doesn't have that trustworthy pathos about him, particularly to a lad as paranoid as our Harry. You mentioned retired Aurors, what about Moody? Will he be going back?" 'Our Harry?' Peter really hoped that Voldemort wasn't still hanging on to that dream of turning

the boy, that could be very dangerous. He quickly refocused his mind on the question at hand though.

"It would appear not. Given that Bill Weasley is not giving up his position at Gringotts, Moody will continue to run the Order on a day to day basis as its Deputy. We still haven't had any luck penetrating the Order yet, either from recruiting current members or from inserting our own people.....though I feel that sending young Percy in there would be our best bet, since he would be a kind of combination of the two approaches. If we lost him.....well we haven't lost that much, and just the knowledge that their wayward brother has gone to our side will hurt the morale of the rest of the family."

"It's a thought Wormtail, it's a thought. For right now though, just encourage Weasley to do his best to get back into Fudge's good graces. We might even stage a capture for him, so that he'll look better. It worked with Rookwood those many years ago, it should work again now."

"Maybe we could give them Malfoy? After a thorough memory wipe of course. He would go a long way toward the goal of getting Percy back to his former job.....even Potter wouldn't object if that happened, though he might be pissed that he couldn't kill Malfoy himself."

Voldemort then did something Pettigrew had never seen before: he opened his mouth to object, but then closed it. Malfoy was valuable up to a point; he was reasonably powerful and certainly very rich. The rich part was easily gotten around, as his mother still controlled the finances until May, when Draco reached his majority. The powerful part? That was the rub, could they do without him? Draco hated no one in the world more than Harry Potter, and the thought had been in the back of Voldemort's mind for some time to send Draco at Potter on a suicide run of some kind.

"That's an interesting idea, very interesting. Get with Rastaban and Rodolphus and come up with a plan. I'm pretty sure I can get Narcissa on board." They both smiled, as Lucius' widow had not been subtle in her attentions or her intentions. Voldemort, in the sense that he acknowledged the emotion of 'love' at all, knew that she didn't

have those kinds of feelings for him. Pureblood families were often like muggle aristocrats in that they didn't always marry for love, and the union of Narcissa Black and Lucius Malfoy had been no exception. Their marriage had been about family alliances, and uniting the Houses of Black and Malfoy, which was accomplished.....though somewhat muted when the Black elders all died without disinheriting Sirius, who was left in control of most of the money (some was left in trusts to the various daughters, Sirius being the only son in his generation that survived).

"You think she would go that far? I have no doubt that she did not mind giving up Lucius, but her own son? I mean I know you'll do it regardless of what she thinks....." He hastily tacked that last bit on, seeing his Master's face darken a bit.

"Good save there Wormtail.....and yes, I think she would go along with it, since she is hoping for a son from a different father."

"Is that something you're thinking about Master? You do need an heir after all." This was a much speculated on subject, but one that no one had ever dared address until now. As far as anyone knew, Voldemort had no children, or at least had never referred to any. Pettigrew was really the only Death Eater who could get away with questions like that, as even Voldemort had realized that he needed someone to ask him the hard questions and act as a kind of devil's advocate.....though only in private, with no witnesses. Proof of that was that Peter hadn't been Crucioed in months, and several of his suggestions and plans had been adopted without modification.

"I am thinking about it yes, though I am not in any hurry."

"I don't think it would be out of the question that young Malfoy sees himself as your potential heir." They both started chuckling at that, not at the absurdity of Draco believing that mind you, he was a Malfoy after all....but at the absurdity of it actually coming to pass. Left unsaid by both of them was the thought that perhaps Potter could have been that heir.....Harry Potter at sixteen years old looked so much like Tom Riddle at the same age as to present some questions, and one of Voldemort's long put off plans was doing a more thorough

research of Potter's family history, both muggle and wizard, to find out if that resemblance was just a coincidence.

"He can think that all he wants, dreams are good for a young man, it will keep him going, and keep him loyal. The fact that it will never happen is not a detail he needs to be burdened with right now. Now, Wormtail, once your plans for elevating Weasley are in place and in motion, I want you to revisit an old strategy that has been long suggested, but that I've resisted." This was interesting, what was he talking about?

"What strategy would that be Master?"

"How many Death Eaters do we currently have? Both in secret and out in the open?"

"Roughly 150, with another dozen or so being actively recruited right now. Plus we have three dozen Giants and about an equal number of fighting Trolls at our disposal as well."

"That's not enough for what I have planned. We need to at the very least, double our Death Eater numbers by June. I realize I have said no to this idea in the past, but I now acknowledge that it is time.....we are going to invade Hogwarts and end this silly business once and for all, taking out Dumbledore, Potter, and everyone else there who has any degree of power. This has to end soon, before Potter gets any stronger, or figures out what this 'power he knows not' business is."

"So you really believe in this Prophecy Master? You believe that that dimwitted Divination teacher is right?"

"I cannot afford not to, not after Potter survived Avada Kedavra, and all the situations since.....it makes me wonder if anything can kill him."

Saturday, February 1st, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

1:00 pm

The first day of the first round of the tournament started as soon as brunch was cleared away and cleaned up, as they had thirty-two matches to get done that day, and it was preferable to get it done before dinner. The names of the sixty-four students who would be dueling today had been announced during dinner time the previous night, among them being Ron, Neville, Blaise, and Justin, as well as four other executive council members (Dean, Michael Corner, Ernie MacMillan, and Su Li). All of the sixty-four were in the audience, which was considerably larger than the previous weekend, necessitating a magical enlarging of the room to accommodate all of them. The duelists would be told one duel ahead of time that they would be going (for example, at the beginning, the first two duels were announced, and then after each duel, another was announced, so that competitors would have at least a couple of minutes to mentally prepare themselves).

Ron was first, leading to much speculation that he was the number one seed. He faced off against Ravenclaw first year Julie Winchell, she of the ten minute duel from last week. Julie wasn't a very powerful witch yet, being eleven years old didn't help, so Ron decided to try something slightly different here (Harry's theory about Ron teaching Daniel Garcia about the rushing forward had been right). He put up a medium power shield, and slowly walked forward, using the shield to deflect the minor hexes and jinxes that Winchell fired at him. Ron didn't walk very quickly, but he never stopped, as he could clearly hear Julie shouting out her spells (doing it more quietly not being taught for another few years), as she inexplicably did not move from her initial spot on the floor, tiring all the more after each spell she fired. Once he got to within half a meter of her, he put her out of her frustration and nailed her with a Stupefy.

After she crumpled to the ground, he took her wand and tossed it to Bliss. He then woke her up and gently helped her to her feet, prompting a round of applause from the spectators for his sportsmanship. They shook hands and left the dueling area, making way for the next two competitors.

The seventh duel featured the first upset, when Daniel Garcia continued his hot streak by beating Slytherin third year Molly Jackson, who in an added bonus for the Gryffindors was one of the pro-Dark students in her House. Daniel had looked relieved at the start when he found out he wouldn't have to face Neville or Blaise, the two remaining seeds competing that day.....but once the duel started he looked very calm and cool and kept Jackson off balance by firing spell after spell at her, eventually breaking her weak-to-begin-with shield down and knocking her out, though she had gotten a few hexes off. Garcia was the only first year to win a match that day out of the fourteen fighting, as none of them had been lucky enough to face each other. Garcia was also the only dueler to beat someone older, and really the only first year to make their match competitive against an older student.

Neville, Blaise, and the rest of the executive council members won their matches easily as well. All told, only two members of the larger DA had lost, one of whom faced another regular DA member, the other losing to Dean. The longest match was only four minutes, and the entire set of matches was completed by 4:00 pm, which pleased the House Elves to no end, since they could have an easier time setting up for dinner. The short length of the matches wasn't expected to last though, as the field was winnowed down to the more talented duelers.

At dinner that night, the next quarter of the field was announced, including seeds Ginny and Cho (leaving Terry, Jack, and Luna to contest their matches the next weekend). At the Gryffindor table, Ron and Neville were careful not to brag about their victories, as they were nothing else but expected.

Sunday, February 2nd 1997

Sunday's matches saw Cho and Ginny also win relatively easily, Cho against Gryffindor reserve Chaser Roy Figg (a second year), whom she took about five minutes to defeat, even though she only got hit by one minor hex. Figg, who had not been there for dodgeball, nonetheless used the same kind of strategy..... though he only stood still long enough to fire three spells total against Cho, given that he was not yet comfortable focusing his power and energy while moving.

She managed to hit him once, with Stupefy.....after Figgar finally started to wear down from dodging.

Ginny defeated Trevor Miller, the fourth year Slytherin who had been Theo's roommate, until given the boot and forced to move in with the seventh year boys. Miller was more a Potions and Arithmancy person, and was not very good at shooting spells off. Ginny finished him off in about two minutes, after she charged at him a few feet of the time, hitting him with minor hexes to keep him off balance and to torment him a little bit. No other executive council members lost, though the big test would be Dennis Creevey the following weekend, as he was the youngest council member by two years, it would be interesting to see him against one of the older students.

All in all, Gryffindor only lost five matches the entire weekend, the best total of all of the Houses. Slytherin did the worst as for total losses, though percentage wise Hufflepuff was in the basement, having lost almost half of their first years in the play-in matches the week before. Harry made a point of congratulating all of the winners from Gryffindor; he had stayed to watch all of the matches both days, and was beginning to seriously regret agreeing to stay out of the tournament. Most nights he was doing practice duels against the other four of his inner circle, he was determined that one of them would win. None of them could take him out of course, but he felt that none of the others could beat them. He doubted that the luck of the draw would let them all advance to the semi-finals, but that would be the best case scenario.

Saturday, February 8th, 1997

The week went by mostly without incident. Classes were held, Quidditch was practiced, homework was done, and two Slytherin students, both in the third year, defected to Blaise' side. This was in addition to the second year girl that had done so the week before. The ratio was now 36-24 for Blaise, much to the chagrin and anger of Sean Touchet, Neil McCauley, and Matthew Miller (Trevor's brother), the seventh year Chasers who were more or less in charge of the pro-Dark students. There were now threats being made on the sly, and most every Slytherin on both sides walked around with their wands out.

Jack Sloper was the only seed to fight in this third section of the first round, and he proved to be quite the quick draw artist, taking out his first year Ravenclaw opponent with one shot, in only a couple of seconds. It helped that his opponent had obviously been expecting some kind of sideways or forward move by Sloper first, while Jack himself never even moved his legs. It turned out afterward that he had a touch of the flu, and didn't really feel like exerting himself against an opponent who had no chance to win, so he decided beforehand to end things as fast as he could. Still, everyone took note of his quick draw skill.

Colin and Hermione both fought as well, taking out their opponents easily. Indeed there were no class upsets during the third day, as the fears of the first and second years came to fruition. The matches lasted again until about 4:00 pm, with none being longer than three minutes. Some of the older students who were in the audience made a point to tell the first and second years that their chance would come. These kids knew what they were talking about, since they had all watched Harry and Cedric in the Tri-Wizard Tournament two years ago, dreaming it could be them someday, even after the horrible conclusion.

Surprisingly, none of the older students (the ones considered to have a chance to win) were resentful that Harry wasn't in this tournament, or at least none had voiced any resentment about being cheated of having a chance to prove their talent against everyone. They acknowledged that given the special training he must have had, and the raw power that everyone knew he did have, that he would win in a walk.....and it was no mean feat to be considered the second best duelist in the Hogwarts student body.....and in the top ten overall in Hogwarts period, behind only Harry, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Bliss, and probably Shepherd (not necessarily in that order), as the rest of the teachers were not considered to be that great with their wands.....and in the case of Binns and Hagrid , not or barely able to use them at all. It was hard to get glory at Hogwarts in these days of Harry Potter and his gang, but it inspired little new resentment.

Sunday, February 9th, 1997

The last day of the tournament featured no real upsets, only a perceived one. Terry Boot and Luna won their matches easily, as did the other executive council members, none of whom had been forced to face each other over the tournament's first round. The only perceived upset was by Dennis Creevey over Wayne Hopkins, a sixth year Hufflepuff who, while a decent Quidditch player, was considered to be something of a nonentity (Blaise privately referred to him as the Hufflepuff version of Seamus Finnegan).

Dennis' role in the executive council was not widely known outside of the council itself, everyone thought he just tagged along after his brother, who strangely enough for a brother, didn't seem to mind him coming along.....unlike the twins, who had only reluctantly tolerated Ron's presence most of the time. He had snuck out to Hogsmeade the year before to hear Harry's story about the Tri-Wizard fiasco, and soon found himself the youngest person in Dumbledore's Army. Even now, over a year later, most of the non-Gryffindors knew only that he was the best in his class at Defense, though not really the reasons why. Inside Gryffindor House he was seen as Harry's unofficial mascot, a somewhat annoying little kid that Harry allowed to be on the outside edges of his circle for some reason. Harry himself occasionally wondered how Dennis had popped up in the original DA, but eventually just took his presence as fact and gave him the same rights and responsibilities of anyone else in the executive council. As a result, Dennis was far ahead of his class in the subject, and the superior to all the fourth year students as well.

He defeated Hopkins using a combination on Ron's and Ginny's strategies, by putting up, in his case, a weak shield, while moving forward and throwing hexes out from behind it.....the trick being that he always dodged to the left or right as his shield disintegrated, then renewed it as Hopkins wondered what to do. It took about five minutes to win this way, but he wasn't in any hurry, since the spells Hopkins was hurling his way were coming nowhere near his shield usually. Dennis finished him off eventually, never having been hit with a spell. Hopkins was pretty embarrassed, he was the only fifth year and above to be eliminated by someone younger.

Another, very mild, upset took place that day as well, as Xavier Jones, another first year Gryffindor, joined his roommate Daniel Garcia as

the only first year students to make the second round. He defeated second year Hufflepuff Gina Henry in the very last match, with his entire House urging him on from the audience. Xavier did nothing more than just stand there and hurl hexes from where he stood, but enough of them hit Gina that he was able to do a last charge and Stupefy her. This was not such a surprise to Professors Bliss and Flitwick, as Xavier was the top of his year so far in their subjects. Harry knew him to say hello, but not much else, and had not been doing anymore tutoring with him than he had with any of the other first year students.

Overall the first round of the tournament was considered a success by the faculty. No one had gotten hurt during the 128 matches, and no one had cheated either. Very few of the matches had been exciting, but the initial impulse behind the idea of having the whole school compete was that every student should have a chance, and that's all that any true competitor asks for. The next weekend was promising to be better, as all the contestants would have the confidence of having won a match (or two in Daniel Garcia's case).

The trunk group (as I call those who were keyed into the trunk system), including Dean and Seamus (who had been keyed in after the pensieve incident), all gathered in Ron's apartment for a movie that night. The muggle born/raised students generally picked the movies (Harry, Anthony, Justin, Dean, and Seamus), and it was Anthony's turn to pick the movie, and he chose the movie *Braveheart*, which had come out two years previous to great acclaim and many awards.....and large hackles amongst many in England. Those in the trunk that night found it riveting; the girls liked the romantic aspects between Mel Gibson and Catherine McCormack, and again between Gibson and Sophie Marceau. The boys were all agog at the battle scenes, with the three big set pieces getting the most attention: the Battles of Lanark (the revenge after Murron is killed), Stirling, and Falkirk. After the last battle, Harry started musing on what it would be like to use some of these tactics at Hogwarts. None of the big three battles in the movie were about invading a castle of course.....but he kept running the scenes over in his mind once the movie was done and people were talking about it. As everyone was going back to their rooms, he found himself standing next to Seamus, waiting for his turn to climb up the ladder.

"Have you ever shot one of those bows Seamus? That looks like it would be cool to try."

"Well modern bows are a lot different now Harry, more advanced and easier to fire.....but yeah, my dad taught me to shoot one, he learned about it in the army.....they required soldiers to learn either the sword or the bow, to help them remember the old ways.....why do you ask?

"How hard is it for a kid to learn? I mean, a twelve or thirteen year old could pull back a modern bow right?"

"With some practice, yeah. I was ten when dad taught me, though it was on a basic bow, and I couldn't shoot very far, maybe ten meters with any accuracy after some practice. You've got something in mind, don't you?" By now everyone else had gone upstairs to the main dorm rooms.

"That last battle really stuck with me mate, especially the fire arrows, and the way all the arrows just flew through the sky and rained down on the enemy. They didn't even have to be fired accurately at a specific person, just shot in the right direction. Now we've been planning like crazy for an invasion that might never happen.....but what if we did have to defend the castle, and from a host that we knew was coming?" Now Seamus was getting it, though Harry was only now crystallizing it in his own mind.

"You want to put bows and arrows with the second and third year students don't you?"

"It's something to think about, I know I don't want the seconds to have to fight with their wands if there's a battle, but we could use the manpower help in any way we can. What if we stuck squads of archers on the front two towers, ready to rain down death on the bad guys, at the very least to slow them down so that help can come?"

"Would that be kosher? I mean our 'code' doesn't allow guns, would it allow arrows? The same sort of thing really I would think."

"I'll write Peter Tyson and ask him about that, when he told me about the code, he only said it started with the invention of guns, and bows and arrows have been around for thousands of years. Tell me Seamus, would you use guns to defeat the Death Eaters if you could? I know our culture says that we can't dare try it.....but if there was no other way, would you do it?"

"No, I don't think I would. I just couldn't go against the beliefs of a million wizards and witches, just to take care of one Dark one. What about you?"

"It would make things so much easier if I could say, yes, I would. But I know what it would cost me, and what it would cost all muggle born/raised, so I wouldn't do it.....but the arrows? I would do that, or at least plan for it to be done. Let's get with the other muggle born/raised in the council and start thinking up a strategy."

One after the other they went back up the ladder and into their dorm room, musing on the idea.

Author's Note: Sorry for the long delay folks, but much of it couldn't be helped. About one quarter of the way into this chapter, my hard drive completely died, as in I couldn't load Windows at all.....so I was offline for two weeks as I waited for payday to buy the new hard drive, and for my friend Dave to install it. Two weeks without the internet was not a pleasant thing I don't mind telling you, but I managed somehow. After that it was a major surge in my hours at work that contributed to the delay. Now how does all of this affect Final Straw? Well aside from making you wait four weeks for this chapter, it doesn't, I had intended to make the story a few chapters shorter anyway. Barring any more computer problems, I will finish the story by the end of June. If necessary I'll write the darn thing out in long hand and borrow a computer to load it if I have to.

Apparently I was a bit too hard on myself with my mea culpa last time about the Map and Snape hiding in it, as several readers defended what I did by saying that the Marauders probably did not have access to the old man's office. Here is where the movies/books differences continue to trip us up. My favorite scene in the Azkaban movie is where the twins (who thankfully are better used in this movie, go Phelps brothers) give Harry the Map, and one of their examples is Dumbledore pacing in his study. Did this happen in the book? A month after I wrote it I'm still too lazy to go to my bookshelf to look it up, but let's assume that it was there too. Now, on another note, in the opening scene below I have to tread softly again, so that I can keep my T rating.....though if I had my way I would make it much darker. These are the compromises one makes for a wider readership. Also, I would imagine that my Apparition training technique and theory are not what really would take place, it's just my take on it.

Tuesday, February 11th, 1997

7:30 am

London

Dear Percy,

The time has come for your first test.....or rite of passage as I like to call it. After work, go to Knockturn Alley and begin wandering around. You'll be met by one of our people, and given instructions. If you do not show up, you know what will happen.

Wormtail

Percy looked at the note in his hand and shivered a little bit.....it was time. He knew that today would be the first steps down a long road, one that would either result in power, or death. He had had a few second thoughts about what the deal he had made, but none that lasted very long. In his heart of hearts he knew his family would take him back, even now.....but he didn't really want them back, not after 20 years of looking down on him, of always treating him as more of a cousin than a brother, being the butt of the twins' pranks to the laughter of everyone else....and being moved aside for Potter, he had seen how readily they replaced him with that troublemaker. This way at least, he would have a say in deciding his own fate, and his own happiness. He wasn't sure if Voldemort would win or not, Percy had a healthy respect for Potter's power, though not his maturity or judgment.....but in the end, what did it matter? He would fight the way he wanted to, with no one to answer to but himself and his new master. After all, there were more than a couple of scores to settle.

He went about his workday in a bit of a fog, mostly going through the mound of paperwork on his desk. Perkins was out of the office today, taking care of some such thing that Percy really had not paid attention to the explanation of. No small part of him hoped that perhaps at some point soon he would get to experiment on Perkins, who in recent days had been treating him with even more contempt than before. He somehow fought off these rather pleasant daydreams and got a full day's work done, and left the office at 5:00 pm as usual. He flooed right to the Leaky Cauldron and sipped at a tumbler of fire whiskey, to calm his nerves down a little. After he paid his tab he wandered over toward Knockturn Alley, carefully avoiding coming to close to the twins' shop. He entered the Alley and walked around, not too slowly or too quickly, hoping not to attract any attention. He was not entirely successful however, as a few people noted his red hair and wondered to themselves if he was a Weasley, as Percy

resembled the twins more than any other sibling, and the twins were frequent visitors to Knockturn Alley.

He walked for about ten minutes before he felt a strong grip on his arm that tugged him into a darkish corner, and a pulling sensation that yanked him from Knockturn Alley entirely. Only after landing from the portkey trip did he look over and notice his companion, Peter Pettigrew.

"Hello there Percy, sorry to be so sudden, but your follower had been temporarily diverted and I had to act quickly."

"I was followed in there? I didn't notice anyone?"

"You weren't meant to, professional Aurors aren't always noticed by amateurs. I didn't recognize her, it was probably the metamorph (Tonks). Still, she'll be wandering around for a while looking for you, so let us get this over with." He began walking, and Percy noticed that they seemed to be somewhere in Scotland, and he saw what looked to be a small town about a kilometer to the west.

"What are we doing here?"

"Like I said in my letter, we're here for your first test. There is a man and a woman that we need you to take care of." In spite of the fact that this was what he had been assuming, Percy still went a bit pale.

"You want me to kill them? I thought you didn't want me to be a simple soldier?"

Pettigrew slowed his walking down a little bit and sighed in a bit of exasperation.

"Like I said Percy, this is a test, and once you pass it, you are one of us.....and you need to pass it to leave here. We need to know that you can do what it takes."

Percy took that in and immediately got the not so subtle implication: the two people in question were going to die one way or the other.....the other way meant including himself in the pile of

bodies. They walked a few more minutes in silence as they came to the outskirts of the town. Pettigrew picked his pace back up, and five minutes later they came to the back door of a small one story house. They were greeted at the door by Anton Dolohov, who nodded at the two of them, and addressed Pettigrew.

“Macnair is in the living room with the subjects, and we have a few muggle repelling charms on the house, to make sure there aren’t any visitors.”

“Did they give you any problems?”

“Not in the least, they didn’t know what happened until they were all tied up.”

“Good, let us go inside shall we, we don’t want to attract too much attention standing out here.” They walked inside and went into the living room, where Macnair was standing near the front door, evil grin firmly in place, with the two prisoners tied securely on the couch, with muggle ropes instead of magical ones. Percy looked them over, they seemed to be in their late 20’s, and he could not help but notice that the woman was quite attractive. Both of them looked scared witless, as the older Death Eaters had been explaining in great detail the horrors that were to be visited upon them.

“Who are they? Just some muggles you picked at random?”

“Not quite, they both happen to be squibs, from lesser families of course. Our Master hates squibs you know, and one of his goals is to rid our world of these handicapped people, to make sure they do not reproduce if nothing else. They were chosen because they live in an out of the way little town where we could be in and out without a lot of fuss and bother.”

“So what do you want me to do? Use Avada Kedavra on them?” Percy was still a little nervous, but was growing more and more dispassionate with every word, as he steeled himself for what he was going to have to do.

"At the very least, yes. I do not mind telling you that it would look better for you with most of the troops if you were to torture them some, let everybody know that you have what it takes in that area too. All our Master requires of you though, is to kill them, nothing more. If you want my opinion (he paused, and Percy nodded that he wanted to hear what came next).....I would just throw a few Crucios at them, kill them, and call it a day.....you are going to have to get used to using Crucio if nothing else. I know that you have no experience with this sort of thing, and it might be a good idea to ease on in to it." Macnair and Dolohov had looks on their faces that said exactly what they thought of this plan, but Pettigrew just shook his head at them.

"Keep quiet you two, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither are most Death Eaters. Not every wizard giggles at the idea of torturing people like you two do. Just ignore them Percy and have at it. No one else is going to touch them but you." Pettigrew was being at his patient best, Voldemort had complimented in front of all of the troops a few days earlier for his skill in these types of initiations.. The other two also knew what the pecking order in their organization was, and that only their Master stood higher than Pettigrew.....so they didn't give any voice to their complaints.

Percy took a few deep breaths, counted to ten in his mind, and whipped out his wand, screaming Crucio at the man. The other three Death Eaters were taken a bit aback at this, but smiled when the squib started screaming through his gag. He held the curse for ten seconds, long enough for the man's eyes to cross a little bit, then released it.....amid a rather foul smell, as the squib male soiled himself. He then hit the man with a few medium hexes, and few minor ones. He focused on the man for about five minutes, while contemplating how far to go with the woman. When he was done torturing the man, including a few more Crucios, he paused for a moment to catch his breath. Dolohov and Macnair looked fairly impressed at the performance, while Pettigrew simply stood there looking smug.

The question now was what to do with the woman. Percy had not been with a woman since his breakup with Penelope Clearwater over a year ago, and this woman really was attractive.....but he certainly was not going to do anything with this kind of audience,

there was no way he was that confident. She had been shivering like crazy while her husband was being tortured, and seemed to know why she was being spared the same torture. Percy crossed all of them up though, by walking up to her, and at point blank range, using Avada Kedavra on her. AK was pretty foolproof, especially at six inches from the head, as Percy used it. Dolohov and Macnair now looked very disappointed, as they had clearly hoped to join in on the fun with the woman, but Pettigrew did not look surprised at all. Now Percy would kill the man, who was crying now at the death of his wife.

To everyone's surprise though, that was not to happen for another few minutes, as Percy did some experimenting with Crucio. He used it on different parts of the man's body, and from different angles and distances, always putting as much power as he could into the spell. He was being very analytical in his approach to a spell he had never used before, and Pettigrew mentally patted himself on the back for advocating his recruitment, this guy had the makings of a good Death Eater.....one could tell he had the taste for it. Eventually, after the man started convulsing uncontrollably, Percy put the squib out of his misery and AK'd him. Dolohov patted him on the back and went about 'sanitizing' the crime scene. He set the bodies upright on the couch and slit each of their throats with a knife he pulled out of his robes, to make it look like a normal muggle robbery.....which was why Macnair was rooting around upstairs for valuables, which he brought down in a leather sack (some of the items were obviously shrunk). The four of them exited the house via the back door, and began walking toward the outskirts of town. Pettigrew turned to Percy, who was looking very tired (not surprising, after all the magical energy used during all of those Crucios), but not unhappy.

"So Percy, how was it for you?"

"It was different than I thought it would be.....I can't really say I enjoyed it, but it was an interesting experience. Is it safe to assume that I will have to do something like this again?"

"Quite safe actually, though I should tell you that you passed your test with flying colors, didn't he men?"

Dolohov and Macnair agreed wholeheartedly, though it was very disconcerting for the young Weasley to see those two smiling all the time.

"Yes you did Percy, and I will inform our Master of that, he should be very pleased."

"Am I to stay undercover then?"

"For the time being at least, but there is a sense that perhaps it would be best if you were 'unmasked', so to speak, for the deleterious effect it would have on the rest of your family. This is just something we are kicking around mind you, nothing definite has been decided. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?" He knew that Voldemort would do whatever he wanted to anyway, but it wouldn't hurt to hear what the man had to say.

"I don't know Peter, whatever you want me to do I guess. You really think it would bother them?"

"Oh it would certainly bother them, how much is the question.....enough to get them to do something rash perhaps. Of all your siblings, only Bill could not be adequately described as a hothead, there is potential there to set the rest of them up for something I think." Peter seemed to be making this up as he went along, but in reality this was a fast developing plan within the inner circle. The debate now amongst them, in regards to Percy, was between outing him as a Death Eater (the preference of all of the Blacks/Malfoys), and using him to arrest Draco and get his old job back (the preference of Pettigrew himself, and from what he gathered and suspected, of Voldemort.....though his Master was still contemplating). Young Draco did not know of his tenuous position among the Death Eaters of course, not that he had anywhere else to go, after being unmasked (so to speak) by Snape.

"Now tell me something Percy, who is Fudge's inside man in the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Mundungus Fletcher, he gets a small stipend from the Minister's private fund, as well as some useful overseas contacts to do his business."

"Could Fletcher be bought for our side? Or at the very least, rented?"

"If the approach was made the right way, the man is very afraid of Dumbledore, and even more terrified of Mad Eye." As was every rational person, thought Pettigrew. This was interesting information, he mentally resolved to bring some Veritaserum on his next Percy trip and mine his brain completely, there was a lot that could be learned. They walked a bit further, and eventually came to their entry point. Peter handed Percy an old sock.

"This is a portkey that will take you back to Knockturn, be sure to walk around for another little bit, so that the metamorph sees you and reports back to your brother, or Dumbledore, or whoever holds her loyalty today. I'll be in touch soon." He took out a pocket watch chain and motioned for Macnair and Dolohov to grab on. They disappeared with a small pop, and Percy soon did the same.

Percy would go on two more squib killing missions over the next two weeks, and wound up killing five more squib adults.....and he was not the only one doing his training that way, over the course of the two week span, twenty-seven squibs were killed, causing the Ministry to stand up and take some notice. The squib population in Britain was relatively small, somewhere around four hundred, so the number of deaths was becoming significant. No one seriously thought that it was anything but Voldemort behind it, and the known squibs (Ministry officials assumed that there were a few dozen who had, purposely or not, escaped official notice) were being advised to either take extended vacations outside Britain for awhile, or to defend themselves much better (since squibs were technically muggles, the gun 'laws' did not apply to them).

7:30 pm

Office Wing, Hogwarts

Harry and Neville, Map in front of them, walked quickly down the staff corridor and into Bliss' office, for their second Apparition lesson. The first one had been two weeks earlier, and dealt just with the theory of what to do and how to do it. Sarah Westbrook had been their teacher then, and she worked them over harder than Hermione ever had, making sure that they knew the theory front and back before they were allowed to leave the office that night. She stressed that the two of them were working on a greatly compressed learning curve, and it would be helpful if they figured out how to at least Apparate a few dozen meters in their first practical lesson.....which was now at hand, the Biller crew having been on duty the previous week. They were met by Travis Biller, who had a direct floo connection to his old subordinate's office (Hogwarts offices are not on the normal floo system, direct connections must be set up by the Floo Regulatory Office, which was breaking in a new Head after Magdalena Edgecombe's life sentence at Azkaban).

"Hey there guys, ready to start Apparating?"

"You bet." "I can't wait."

"Well Sarah says you seemed to pick up the theory pretty well, now it's time for your first practical." He held out a medium length piece of rope and the two teenagers grabbed on. A simple 'activate' pulled them away, and they landed in what looked to be in the middle of a football pitch. Harry was more used to portkeys than Neville was, and recovered from the trip first. He noticed Rob and Sarah standing on opposite sides of the pitch, next to some markers.

"Where are we?"

"About fifty kilometers from Hogwarts, at a secondary school's football pitch.....in honor of you Harry, it's the pitch for the Rowling School, where the British youth authorities think you are right now. The Headmaster here knows that we are having this little exercise, so there is not any danger of us being caught. Now, first things first (he thought for a moment and randomly picked his first test subject).....Neville, walk over to Sarah." Neville did so, and Sarah had him stand on one of the yellow markers she had placed. Biller raised his voice so that everyone could hear him from where he stood.

"Ok Neville, I want you to picture yourself on the center hash mark, right here. Concentrate as hard as you can in your mind, and think the incantation that you learned two weeks ago. Take your time, the distance is only about twenty meters so splinching should not be an issue."

Neville had a look of intense focus on his face, and after taking a few deep breaths, started muttering to himself.....and all of the sudden, a very loud CRACK was heard, and he disappeared from his marker and reappeared right on top of the chosen hash mark, looking quite panicked until he realized that he had done it properly.....realization that was helped by the other four applauding him.

"Excellent Neville, great job."

"It was all Sarah's doing, she was great at getting me to understand it." The twenty-nine year old witch gave a quick curtsy (to the amusement of Rob, who promptly did a mocking one of his own).

"Now, Harry, go over to Rob and do what Neville did." Harry had a question as he walked over to Rob's position.

"Why was the crack so loud?"

"Because of the amount of focus you had to put on it, that was Neville's mental energy creating the noise. As you get more and more used to doing it, the crack lessens and gets quieter. Some wizards and witches can do it silently, like Sarah. Rob and I make a tiny noise when we do it, barely enough to notice if one is not paying attention." With that comment, he proceeded to demonstrate by cracking over to where Harry was standing, and indeed the noise could barely be heard by any of them. He cracked back over the center line, and motioned for Harry to come on over. Harry closed his eyes, and without meaning to, spoke the incantation quickly in his head. Crack.....about half the noise level of Neville's, and he wound up directly on the spot that he aimed for, right next to Neville. All three Aurors were suitably impressed.....though not in the least surprised.

"Well done Harry, now go back to Rob over there. Neville, go back to Sarah." The two of them did so, with a slight bit less noise for Harry, and about the same level of noise for Neville. At Travis' direction, they went back and forth two more times, then started crossing the field (width wise, not length wise), Apparating between Rob and Sarah. The purpose of this was to make the incantation, the focus necessary, and the instinct all become familiar and easy to the two students. After they appeared to have mastered these distances, Travis had them going the length of the field a few times, all of which they accomplished quite well, without any splinching whatsoever, and a lessening of the noise for both Neville and Harry, though they were nowhere near as quiet as even Rob and Travis. After about an hour, the two teenagers were looking pretty ragged, having used a lot of magical energy. The three Aurors spent the next hour sharing some stories about their training and some of their own school experiences (all three were Gryffindor alumni). Neville in particular walked away from this night grateful that Harry was not competing in the tournament, if he had access to this kind of tutoring every week.

Travis sent Neville back to Hogwarts with Rob and Sarah, wanting a few more minutes to privately talk with Harry. They sat on the player bench on the sidelines as Travis steeled himself for what he was about to tell his young pupil.

"I am not sure how to tell you this Harry, so I'm just going to come out and say it.....we have reason to believe that Percy Weasley was approached to become a Death Eater sometime in the last couple of weeks." Harry felt a little sick inside, as this was something he had been dreading for months now.

"Can I ask how you know this? Did he accept?"

"We have our ways Harry, many underworld types are willing to barter information with us. I have to tell you that Voldemort coming back is really leading to a crime surge, as we have to make so many deals with these type of people and forgive or ignore their activities.....but I digress (he sighed). We do not know for sure whether he accepted or not, there are conflicting reports."

"I take it you haven't approached him directly to find out?" Biller chuckled a bit at hearing that.

"We are capable of subtlety you know, so no we have not. I can tell you that he has no Dark Mark on either arm, which is somewhat encouraging.....don't ask me how I know about the mark."

"How about slipping him some Veritaserum?" Biller smiled at these teenager type questions, as if he had not already thought of things like this.

"We're thinking about that, the problem being that Percy doesn't eat or drink anything in his office.....I have to tell you that it is very, very weird going into that office and not seeing Arthur.....so we haven't had an opportunity to slip him something. If it comes to it, we'll just break into his apartment and plant something."

"Are you going to all this trouble because he is a Ministry employee? Or because he is a Weasley and a Ministry employee?"

"Something of both, plus the Minister is taking an interest in this rumor as well. This morning I had to talk him out of bringing Percy into an interrogation room and questioning him hard." Harry did not see that as such a bad idea, given that it was Percy and all.

"What's wrong with that? If it gets the truth, where's the harm?" Another teenager question.

"Because it would set a bad example for the other Ministry employees, that's why. In the last two years we have only had one unmasked Death Eater found to be working there, Magdalena Edgecombe. Now of course there must be others, but that's not the perception there right now. It's hard enough to get talented people to come work for the government, add constant paranoia and harassment to the menu? All we would ever get would be Percy types, ambitious suck-up bootlickers who say what their Department Heads want to hear." He sounded more than a little bitter with that last comment.

"I understand.....do you want me to tell the others about this? Or should I keep this under my hat?"

"I would prefer that you keep this to yourself for the time being, that's why I had Neville go back ahead of us. I don't want any of the brothers to go off half-cocked or anything." Harry nodded, and voiced something that had been nagging at him ever since this subject had come up.

"Did I help do this? By having him demoted from Fudge's office? Was this the straw that broke the camel's back?"

"I'll be honest with you Harry, it might have been, yes. I dealt with Percy a great deal when he was the Minister's assistant, so I got to know his work persona pretty well.....and I just do not see him turning on us when he had that much access and influence.....and he had quite a bit of both. But keep in mind two things Harry: first, we do not know for sure that he has joined Voldemort, like I said, all we have are conflicting reports.....though I have to admit that more than one of them have him going Dark; second, becoming a Death Eater is a choice, a choice that any halfway powerful or well connected wizard has to make at some point in their lives. I was in my last year at Hogwarts when I was approached, just a few months before the end of the war. I had a decision to make, a choice to make, what side I was going to take and how I was to live my life. Now for me, it was an easy choice to reject the advances, I have not regretted it one bit, and I've been an Auror now for over half of my life."

"You're saying that Percy is choosing his path then."

"He is choosing it, he decided years ago that power and authority were the things that mattered most to him. Now he won't get authority with Voldemort, not really.....but he will get power, more than most twenty year olds would get doing legitimate work." Harry pondered this for a moment, and Travis got up and took another portkey out of his pocket.

"We had better get you back to school, the longer you're gone....." Harry nodded and grabbed the rope without another word. They went back to school, appearing in Bliss' office, after which they arranged their meeting time for the next week (which would not involve Apparition). Harry made his way to Gryffindor Tower, debating in his

mind about what to do next. He kept to his agreement though, and did not tell Ron or Ginny of Travis' suspicions (though it was clear to him that it was not just Travis who suspected Percy), as he shared Biller's feeling that they would not react positively, and might well try to hurt Percy. It hurt a little bit, keeping that from them.....but Harry figured that his word had to mean something to people other than his closest friends.

The next night, at his session with John Yamura (this term, the lessons were on Tuesday with Biller, and Wednesday with Yamura, instead of Monday and Tuesday), he asked him for some training with knives and maybe swords.....Harry just could not get Braveheart out of his mind, and with it the idea that if he could not win a magical duel with Voldemort (and he did not really think that he could), he could even the odds by using some weapons. Surely Voldemort wouldn't be expecting something like that, would he? Yamura readily agreed, chuckling when Harry brought up the cinematic inspiration for his request. He admitted that he had been captivated by Akira Kurosawa movies when he was growing up, and loved the look of a good sword fight. He told Harry that they could begin some light knife training the next week, and Harry promised him that one of the twins would stop by the next afternoon with some money to pay for a set of fighting knives and a couple of swords (as well as some wooden counterparts for better training), if John would do him the honor of picking them out. His instructor had no problem with this, and Harry was already looking forward to their next lesson.

Friday, February 14th, 1997

Hogwarts

Valentine's Day was pretty festive this year at Hogwarts. The Great Hall was decorated by all of the House Elves in time for breakfast.....lots of red, hearts, and crepe paper. No dance was being held that night, but arrangements had been made so that couples could share individual sized tables if they liked at dinner time. Also, House tables were relaxed so that mixed House couples could dine together at breakfast and lunch, and Harry, Ron, and Neville were seen at the non-Gryffindor tables for both breakfast and lunch, eating with their girlfriends.

Feeling a bit bored and at loose ends lately, Harry decided to liven things up (and amuse himself) by adding a special touch to the festivities, as he paid a rather large bribe of WWW products to Peeves and had him fly around during breakfast and lunch, singing love songs as loudly and obnoxiously as he could. The highlight of breakfast was when the mouthy poltergeist positioned himself in front of Dumbledore and sang 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For', by U2. Dumbledore, while not appearing to be familiar with the ten year old pop song, took the performance with good grace and cheer.....the same could not be said for the rest of the student body, especially the muggleborns/raised, most of whom couldn't control themselves and started laughing uproariously once they heard the opening words.....even Hermione was giggling. Harry just sat in his place at the Ravenclaw table with a placid smile on his face, making sure not to give away that it was his idea, he thought the lyrics rather appropriate for the old meddler. The old man gave him quite a stare at one point, but neither of them gave anything away in their facial expressions, even though.....or perhaps especially because, most of the faculty and students were fully aware of and enjoying the staring contest. On his way to classes that morning he was thanked for the entertainment by quite a few people (Professor Hill, Muggle Studies, was still laughing as he spoke to Harry in the hallway), who were correctly assumed that he had set up Peeves. He admitted nothing though, he just smiled.

At lunch, Harry changed things up a bit, as he decided to shift targets. The students all took their seats for the meal, as Peeves again came into the Great Hall, and seemed to be doing a Fleetwood Mac's greatest hits collection for most of the meal, floating up to couples and serenading them for a minute at a time, before moving on to his next targets, all of whom were selected by Peeves himself and seemed to be taking the singing in good fun. Most everyone in the Hall had one eye peeled on Hermione and Colin, as the smart money was on them being the feature performance for the meal.....indeed, Peeves left them alone during Fleetwood time, and the anticipation had the room buzzing. Finally, sensing that he had the entire room dancing to his tune (pun intended), Peeves positioned himself in front of Pansy Parkinson, and sang Bonnie Raitt's song 'I Can't Make You Love Me", while holding aloft a picture of Draco Malfoy that he had

taken while pranking him last December. Pansy had been somewhat indiscriminate in her threatening over the past weeks, even as she was becoming more and more isolated within her House, as the pro-Dark totals drifted ever downward (averaging one defection per week), and Harry felt that she deserved a reminder of where she stood in the school's pecking order. There was little laughter in the Hall during this performance, but most everyone at the student tables were smiling broadly, enjoying the moment (Peeves was actually trying to sing this song properly, and doing a pretty good job of it), while the faculty were muttering between themselves, and McGonagall and Sinistra seemed to be debating whether or not to stop the singing. For her own part, Pansy looked more lost and sad than anyone had ever seen her before, but she managed not to start bawling. She got a few sympathetic looks from the seventh year Slytherin girls (the only girls other than herself and Millicent who were now openly pro-Dark), but the rest of the Slytherin girls were giving her mocking stares (having heard way too much about 'dear Draco' and his power and money over the years). Peeves finished his song, bowed to Pansy, and left the Great Hall to much applause and cheering.

As they left the Hall, McGonagall stopped Harry.

"Was that last part really necessary Mr. Potter? Humiliating her like that?" Again, Harry was not about to admit that this was his idea, especially not to a teacher.

"Talk to Peeves ma'am, he was the songbird today not me. Besides, if you can't mock a Death Eater's girlfriend, who can you mock? Peeves never did like Malfoy you know." He gently disengaged himself and went off to prepare Peeves' care package of goodies, which would (by prior arrangement), just happen to be left at a certain spot near Astronomy Tower for the poltergeist to find. McGonagall did not attempt to stop him, she just stood there shaking her head. The rest of the afternoon passed without much happening, though Daphne later told Harry that Pansy was vowing revenge quite loudly in the Slytherin Common Room, and that he should watch his back for awhile.

That night, Harry and Luna shared a private dinner inside his trunk (she was loaning hers out to Lisa and Terry for the evening, Justin

and Hannah were double dating with Ron and Susan, while Blaise and Daphne had talked the twins into loaning them their trunk for the night). Because of Luna's love of candles, every meal they shared in there was by candle light usually, so for a change of pace, Harry had Dobby put up a big disco ball and strobes.....which took a hair bit of the romance out of it, but made Luna giggle like crazy when she saw it. They had agreed not to exchange presents, an agreement that Harry promptly broke when he took out a nice watch that he had bought via Bill from a jewelry store in London.....well really via Ashley, who had great taste for such things. Luna couldn't take her eyes off it at first, the watch was not too expensive, but was one of those watches that looked like an antique but really was not, it really was very stylish. She put it on immediately and had a grin on her face the whole rest of the night, particularly after she gave Harry his present of a Wizarding Wireless Network receiver, something Harry had been talking about getting for months but never really got around to. They toasted each other with the one glass of wine they allowed themselves, and the rest of the night went even more swimmingly as they enjoyed their private time.

Saturday, February 15th, 1997

1:00 pm

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Thirty-two matches were scheduled for the day, half of the total second round. The other half would take place the next day, and all the competitors knew was what day they would compete, not though not what time and against whom. The Great Hall was packed with what appeared to be over ninety percent of the school, including all 128 competitors.....even the half who were not fighting were there to scout for the next rounds, as everyone anticipated a few more interesting matches than in the first round.

Ginny was the first of the seeded students up this day, competing in the fourth match of the day against fourth year Maria Schuler, of Ravenclaw, who was one of the more active members of the DA, always asking Lisa and Luna for extra advice and tutoring. Ginny looked confident and ready, while Schuler looked a bit defeated right

from the announcement of her opponent, a common reaction for those who faced the seeds in this round, the first round victories had emboldened a lot of fourth and fifth year students into thinking that maybe they had a chance to win the tournament.....all they needed was a good draw and some luck (like Sloper and his flu from the week before, he had readily admitted that he would have been in trouble if the match had gone more than a couple of minutes or had been against a more advanced student).

Their match didn't last too long either, as Ginny had no interest in giving any future opponents a detailed blueprint of how she fought, and wanted to quickly win and get off the stage. She unleashed a bat bogey hex right away, and used the confusion to make up two-thirds of the distance between them right away. Schuler, who as a Ravenclaw was no dummy, had known that the spell was coming at some point and was able to deflect most of the bats away from her easily.....but in doing so, allowed Ginny time to throw some very powerful Stupefy curses at her, one of which caught her a glancing blow on her left heel, knocking her down (Stupefy needs to be a direct hit, like most spells. Even Avada Kedavra works that way, though hitting any body part fully will do the job properly). The glancing blow knocked her off her feet, and Ginny immediately hit her with Petrificus Totalus right in the back, after which it was a easy shot of Stupefy to end the match, to the polite applause of the crowd.

Jack Sloper, no longer flu ridden, and Cho Chang also won rather easily against two second year opponents who had gotten lucky with good draws in the first round. The first Executive Council member lost this day, in a kind of intra-squad match, as Ravenclaw sixth year Su Li fell to Hufflepuff Ernie MacMillan, in a match that left both of them exhausted by the fifteen minute mark. MacMillan did not look like much of an athlete, but had enough training and endurance from his two years as a Quidditch reserve Chaser that he was able to outlast the Ravenclaw girl. This was the longest match of the tournament thus far, and was action packed enough that they would have deserved the standing ovation they received even if the crowd had not already been standing (no chairs or benches). At the end, Ernie used what seemed to be the last of his magical energy and revived Su Li himself, and helped her to her feet. They walked off together to

be met by a beaming Professor Bliss, who handed them each a large glass of Pepper-Up Potion.

The most interesting match of the day was between Hermione and Jill Shaw, the third year Reserve Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Shaw was not known as a great spell caster, but she was very physically fit and was lightning fast when it came to running. This was Hermione's main weakness.....not that she was heavy or anything, she did not eat nearly enough for that, being too involved with her schoolwork and her time with Colin to snack a lot. That said, the little exercise she got was from walking to classes and the library and back. Shaw knew this, mostly from Ginny, who by chance had been standing next to her when the pairings were announced and had spent the next few minutes filling her head with tactical advice. Shaw proceeded to run Hermione ragged as she dragged the match out for ten minutes by dodging and weaving around the room, only rarely pausing to throw a few hexes here and there at Hermione for the first few minutes.

After this clearly was not working for her, she changed her strategy and started throwing hexes and jinxes at Hermione as fast as she could, which caused the older girl to abandon her stationary position on the floor and begin moving around more.....something that she clearly was not accustomed to doing. One of the things Ginny had reminded Jill in her mutterings was that Hermione had not lasted more than a minute in dodgeball, nor was she that great an asset during the Department of Mysteries (a slight exaggeration, typical of Ginny regarding Hermione). This advice pumped up her confidence as she soon had Hermione gasping for breath from dodging and running. Eventually though, Shaw's lack of spell casting power was her undoing, even though she hit Hermione a few times, the hexes did little damage, as Hermione was able to counter them easily. At the ten minute mark, with practically the entire crowd shouting encouragement to Shaw, Hermione got lucky (maybe) with a Stupefy and ended the match.....she was so tired that for the last minute of the match, Stupefy was the only spell she was using, hoping to end the match in one shot. There was polite applause at the end, as the other Gryffindor Quidditch players in particular congratulated Jill on her fine effort. Hermione and the Creeveys (who were to compete the next day) all looked a bit downcast. She had won of course, but the

blueprint for beating her had largely been filled in. She was not a seed, so if she was unlucky enough to get one of them, or another advanced student, she would be in very large trouble.

Sunday, February 16th, 1997

Ron again led off the day's competition, as he won another easy match.....this time against his Quidditch teammate Sarah Owen. Sarah was a wiz at Herbology and Potions, but not so great at Defense, and had won her first round match by more of a fluke than anything, overcoming one of her second year classmates who had wanted little part of competing in the tournament. When he heard his opponent's name, he briefly toyed with the idea of intentionally prolonging the match in order to try out a few things, but quickly discarded it.....he knew that all it would take was one lucky shot and he would be quite embarrassed young man at the end. This was a feeling shared by most of the seeds, none of them wanted to be the first ones in their group to be eliminated. He dispatched Sarah after about a minute, repeating his same strategy from the week before. He too helped his opponent to her feet after the match, and they walked off arm in arm, Ron whispering to her as they left the dueling area. When queried by Susan afterwards, Ron sheepishly admitted that he promised Sarah that she could score a few extra goals against him in Quidditch practice the next day. Susan, who was only a Quidditch fan through Ron, rolled her eyes at what boys thought important.....until Ron told her that Sarah had made him promise to do it after he mentioned it.....she was only twelve after all.

The impressive runs of Xavier Jones and Daniel Garcia continued in the fifth and eighth matches, as both of them won their duels. Xavier defeated third year Hufflepuff Dante Middleton (a non-DA member), while Daniel took out Ella Shadwin, a second year Gryffindor. Both of them not only built on their confidence from winning their previous matches, but from practicing with each other all week.....both thought it was highly unlikely that they would face each other at any point, so they shared strategies and tried out new tricks on each other.....which they had to, as they were no longer getting any pointers from the older Gryffindors, as all of them were worried about creating monsters who they might have to face in the next round or two. After Daniel won his match, Harry made a point of taking both of

them aside (throwing a cheer over his shoulder for Susan, who was the next competitor and easily won her match) and congratulating them.

"Now guys, I want to make sure that you don't go bragging all over Gryffindor Tower.....and any other place, about your victories. You two have been very impressive, but it would not do to go around making enemies by being all stuck up about it. You are the two best Defense students in the first two years, everyone knows that.....let's not be reminding people right and left."

"We understand Harry, we won't be rubbing it in." Daniel spoke, while Xavier nodded his head furiously in agreement. Xavier decided to strike while the iron was hot:

"Since we are doing so well, does this mean we might have a chance to join the DA?" Harry could have spotted this question a mile away, and knew it was coming when he pulled them aside. He was about to say 'hell no' when he looked at the eager faces in front of him.....and they really were doing extraordinarily well in the tournament. They would probably be the only first or second year competitors still around at day's end (and they were).

"Maybe guys, there is something else I have in mind for some of the younger students. Let me talk to a couple of people first, and I'll find you later in the coming week, Ok?" The smiles on their faces could have lit up the room, as it finally began to dawn on Harry just how much the little kids in his House looked up to him. He sent them off back into the crowd and returned himself to watch the rest of the matches.

The highlight of the day, for those who loved revenge matches, was Pansy Parkinson versus Neville. Pansy was still burning somewhat from her humiliation at the hands of Peeves and Harry (who mentally took his share of credit for her humiliation, as he had chosen her as the target and picked out the song), and saw Neville as a nice substitute for getting back at the both of them. Pansy was not an exceptional Defense student, indeed she was not taking the class this year, but she was about average, and had hate to motivate her, a powerful weapon if used properly.

For his part, Neville liked her no better, and this was his chance to get even a tad with Draco Malfoy, who had tormented him so much for five years (more than one person wondered what the tournament would have been like with Draco, Goyle, and Crabbe in it, they knew Draco could duel, but the goons' magical talent was open to question). He had a faint smile on his face as he stood in the ready position, while Pansy had her trademark pug-like sneer.

When Bliss called out the start, Neville took a page from Sloper's book and whipped out his wand with a Stupefy as fast as he could (something he had been practicing). Pansy barely managed to duck and did a John Woo roll forward, only to be met with a tickling charm that hit her full in the face. The sight of Pansy giggling, if only from a charm, was not one that most of the assembled students ever wanted to see repeated in their lifetimes. Somehow though, she managed to keep moving long enough to reverse it before Neville could finish her off, as he was slowly advancing on her, firing hex after hex.....which did not tire him out noticeably, but made her dance around like a marionette. Neville barely paused for breath as he shot spell after spell at her, very carefully inching up on Pansy. Finally he did take a breath, and Pansy whipped out a quick Reducto at him, which he easily dodged. Reducto was not considered Dark magic per se.....but it was on the borderline, and this pissed off Neville to no end (he, of course, had seen Reducto kill someone just a couple of months earlier).

He quickly used Expelliarmus on Pansy and just barely caught her on her left hand (her wand hand). Her wand went tumbling in Neville's direction, but not right to him after the glancing blow. He used Accio to get the wand into his hand and briefly took his eyes off Pansy as he pocketed it (resisting temptation to snap it).....only to see her charging toward him in a fury, she had quickly remembered the rule that said you could only physically attack your opponent if they had your wand. She made it to about three meters away before Neville even got a spell off, a Stupefy that grazed her shoulder, which slowed her down, but not enough. She managed to barely connect with a punch to his jaw, which still hurt him a bit with her bony left fist. Neville reacted almost instinctively and lashed out hard with his foot, catching her in the knee and nearly taking her kneecap right off.

Pansy dropped like a shot and the match was effectively over, as Neville stood over her for a minute, waiting for her to surrender. She did not do so however, though that was more due to the pain from her knee being the entire focus of her world at the time. Neville let her lay there and cry for a time, then used Petrificus Totalus instead of Stupefy, giving her a few more seconds of pain (she was frozen, but while she could not cry out or hold her knee, she certainly was able to feel the pain of it). He looked over at the pro-Dark Slytherins and gave them a very hard glare as he took out Pansy's wand and used it to Stupefy her.

The room was very quiet at this point, as few in there had ever seen this side of Neville Longbottom. He continued to glare at the Dark Slytherins as he walked out of the dueling area, casually flipping Pansy's wand to Professor Shepherd as he passed by him, Madam Pomphrey rushing past to attend to Pansy. Harry and Ron started the applause, and most of the room quickly joined them, out of respect for Neville and his toughness if nothing else. Ginny and Luna grabbed him in a hug, as both of them realized the catharsis that must have been for him, tormenting (however briefly) one of his former tormentors. Tracey came over to be with him, as he allowed a very satisfied smile to cross his face. He caught Harry's eye and saw the smirk on his friend's face, this had been a good day.

After the matches were over, Harry held an abbreviated session of the Executive Council, dealing with various invasion assignments and contingency plan updates.....after which he pulled Dean and Seamus aside for a little chat.

"Seamus, did you tell Dean about our little conversation about the bows and arrows?"

"No I didn't Harry, I figured you would want some time to think it over before you did anything about it." This was a pleasant surprise, Harry had assumed that Seamus told Dean pretty much everything, since they were as close as he and Ron were. He recounted to Dean his musings after Braveheart the week before.

"That was not the first time I've seen it, I saw it in the theater a couple of summers ago when it came out. My grandmother is Scottish and

she went with us.....are you really going to put bows in the hands of those little kids?"

"Well I want to see how many can handle it, if any are willing to do it. What do I want from you guys? I want you two to be the captains of the squads, to lead them." This caught the two of them a bit off guard. Seamus had seen Harry's expression after the movie last week, and assumed that the archers were a done deal.....but figured that Justin and Anthony would be in command, since they were Harry's closest muggleborn/raised friends. He was more than willing to do it though, and looked at Dean for a moment and shrugged.

"I'm in, I think it would be a lot of fun."

"Me too Harry, tell us what you have in mind." Harry smiled broadly as they accepted. Seamus had been right, at first he was planning to have Justin and Anthony do it, but in the end he felt that he simply could not spare the two of them from the other planned defenses.....plus, it was easier to keep tabs on Dean and Seamus, and get firsthand reports on the training. He thought they might thrive if given some more responsibility, they seemed to be dedicated mentors to their groups in the DA.

"First thing, I'm going to arrange to get the equipment from one of the sporting goods stores in London. Seamus, owl your dad tonight and see if he has a recommendation of where to go, I'll have one or both of the twins pick up the stuff and get it here via the trunks. What I want is, ideally, to get all of the second years on board with it.....I doubt we can fit too many more than them on the two towers (snicker).....if some of the Hufflepuffs decline, I'll talk to Xavier Jones and Daniel Garcia and see if they want in, I have some plans for them as well. I think we will get a good response though, I get second year students coming up to me all the time, asking to be let into the DA, this will be their chance."

"Would we still be doing DA stuff? I'm guessing you'll hold the training at the same time right?"

"That would be up to you guys Dean, the times and everything, since you would be the leaders. I still want you at the Executive Council

meetings of course.....the rest depends on how much spare time you have and can devote to it." The other two looked at each other again, and both seemed to puff up with pride a little bit. They were quite proud that Harry had chosen them to have this kind of responsibility.

"Should we begin talking to the second years now? Or should we wait until the equipment is here?"

"We will start sounding out the Gryffindor second years this week, they should be eager and chomping at the bit to get involved. We'll take Roy and Sarah (the two Reserve Chasers) aside after Quidditch practice tomorrow and see if they are interested. If this works will all the Gryffindors, I'll have the other coordinators sound out their Houses come the weekend."

Dean and Seamus both nodded approvingly, and they talked for a few more minutes about other movies they could use as motivational tools for their soon to be recruits. The three of them parted after Harry asked Dean and Seamus not to talk about this with the other students, he wanted to hit the second year students fresh without a lot of rumors floating around beforehand.

Wednesday, February 26th, 1997

Harry's first knife lesson was very hard, and quite painful, even though he and John Yamura were practicing with wooden knives rather than the real thing. Yamura put red paint on the end of each practice knife before there mini-duels, and Harry's shirt was pretty colorful by the time the lesson was over, despite using his Seeker reflexes to dodge many of the thrusts. Yamura did not bother with practical theory with this lesson, he wanted Harry to get a hands on lesson, and that's what he got. Still, Harry walked away (after a quick Scourgify of his shirt) knowing how to hold his knife, how to strike with it (though he only hit Yamura once, and even he admitted that it was pure luck), and a little bit of how to move. Again, this was becoming his favorite class of the week.

Saturday, February, 22nd 1997

The second match of the day featured the second (and last as it turned out) intra-Executive Council match, between Lavender Brown and Ron. When it was announced, Ron did a bit of good natured grousing about getting a tough opponent.....even though most of the upper years had a hard time taking Lavender seriously as a duelist. Of all the Gryffindor girls of any year, she still spent the most time in the morning getting herself ready (though the results were usually pretty outstanding, and quite a few of the boys were jealous of her boyfriend Dean), but thanks to her DA and Executive Council work, had become pretty good at Defense.....even going so far as to ask Bliss if she could be let into the seventh year class next year (a decision was pending on that one).

Ron had never admitted it to anyone (not even Harry), but he had long held a quiet torch for Lavender (in a purely physical way), at least before this year, and had even made some almost too discreet advances to her in the middle of fifth year, only to be rejected (though kindly, and Lavender had not told anyone about them either).....so it was with that backdrop that Ron charged right toward her, firing a series of Stupefy spells as he got to within two meters of her, close enough to smell her perfume as her got her with tickling and itching charms that made her wiggle all over the place. Somehow she fought through them, and while she felt she didn't have time to counter them (not with Ron still hitting her with about half the jinxes he was firing), she did manage to croak out a Stupefy that caught Ron a glancing blow on his shoulder, knocking him down. Ron's Keeper reflexes really stood him in good stead here though, and he got her with a tripping jinx while he was still falling down. With them both on the ground it was just a matter of who recovered first, and Ron did not have four simultaneous spells on him that needed reversing. He whipped out a Stupefy that caught Lavender right on the sole of her left foot, but still did the job because of its power and the short distance. Ron breathed a sigh of relief that he won against such a potentially dangerous opponent.....while Lavender did the same, feeling that she had not embarrassed herself this day, and had done pretty well overall in the tournament. They walked off the floor to get their hugs from Susan and Dean, respectively.

Another match that caused some interest was Hermione versus Matthew Miller, a seventh year Slytherin Chaser (brother of fourth

year boy Trevor, former roommate to Theo). This was probably Hermione's only match in which she was the crowd favorite, as Harry and Neville led the cheers for her as she easily defeated the older boy in a few minutes, in spite of being run around again. Her knowledge of spells and such far outstripped his and she managed to have him literally tied up (with ropes) inside of about two minutes, allowing her to finish him off straight away with a Stupefy. Harry made a point of letting her see him clap for her as she went back into the crowd, and she gave him a friendly smile in return.

Daniel Garcia finally went down this day, to Blaise Zabini, who had barely been forced to budge from his starting spot in his first two matches. It took Blaise about two minutes as well, as he used nothing but Stupefy in an effort to end the thing as quickly as possible, and he knew from Harry that this was a good kid and he did not want to toy with him. After a dozen near misses and two glancing blows, Blaise managed to get Daniel in the stomach, ending the match.

Also of note were Marietta Edgecombe losing to Justin, and Millicent Bulstrode going down to her reluctant roommate Daphne. Both matches were fairly uneventful, though Marietta made Justin work for his victory.

Sunday, February 23rd, 1997

Jack Sloper had the most interesting match of the day, against fellow seventh year Sean Touchet, the supposed leader of the pro-Dark Slytherins (no one outside their increasingly small group knew the command structure, if Touchet and his cronies even knew themselves). Touchet, even more so than Pansy, was quite fond of the Reducto curse, and that was just about the only spell he used in the match. Sloper managed not to get hit with any before he took a page from Hermione's book and used magical ropes to tie him up. Touchet, to the amusement of the crowd, did not give up though, and began yelling at Sloper, calling him all kinds of filthy names and calling into question his parentage, sexual habits, and much more. Sloper listened to it for a few moments and then hit Touchet with a simple Tickling Charm.....which was made soooooo much worse by the Slytherin being tied up and able to do nothing about it. Jack just stood there and smiled as the charm almost drove his opponent crazy.

It was only after seeing the disapproving look on Bliss' face that he put the other guy out of his misery with a leisurely Stupefy.....well a second one, he intentionally missed with the first one to prolong it just a few more seconds. He walked off to the howling laughter of Harry and company, passing Bliss as he did.

"I suppose if he had kept his big mouth shut....." She just shook her head.....for Dumbledore's benefit mostly, inside she was laughing just as hard as Harry was. She released Touchet from his predicament and reversed the charm on him.....only to have to grab his wand as it looked like he wanted an immediate rematch with Jack.

Xavier Jones also had his run finished, as he faced off against Mandy Brocklehurst, a sixth year Ravenclaw who was a part of the Executive Council. He made the match drag out a few minutes, but he had exhausted his repertoire of spells in the first two matches and Mandy knew just what to expect out of him. She carefully herded Jones into a corner of the dueling area and battered him down with minor hexes that he was too busy dodging or trying to reverse to do any harm to her. She got him with Stupefy at around the four minute mark, and Jones got a very loud ovation as he left the dueling area.

After the last of the matches, the field was down to its final thirty-two competitors:

Gryffindor: Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Jack Sloper, Katie Bell, Seamus Finnegan, Colin Creevey, Dennis Creevey, Parvati Patil, Hermione Granger, Dean Thomas, Natalie MacDonald.

Hufflepuff: Zach Smith, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones, Ernie MacMillan, Hannah Abbot.

Ravenclaw: Luna Lovegood, Terry Boot, Cho Chang, Lisa Turpin, Michael Corner, Stephen Cornfoot, Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Mandy Brocklehurst, Morag MacDougall.

Slytherin: Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, Neil MacCauley, Tracey Davis, Theo Nott.

The only members of the Executive Council to have lost were Su Li and Lavender Brown, Su Li having fallen to her fellow Council member Ernie MacMillan, with Lavender falling to Ron. The rest were joined by Natalie, Zach, and Slytherin seventh year Neil MacCauley. The three of them had quietly made their way through the draw, none of them facing a Council member, but neither did they have any trouble getting through their first three matches. MacCauley was the only pro-Dark student left in the draw.

It was noted by all of the Council members that there had just been the one intra-Council match, and they all wondered at just how blind the supposedly blind draw was. All of Harry's inner circle were wondering who would get a crack at Hermione, they thought that the chances were pretty good that she would have to face one of them. The next weekend's matches were to be split again, with eight each day. This was due to the twin events of a Hogsmeade visit the next Saturday (due to begin after the eighth match finished), and the Slytherin versus Hufflepuff Quidditch game that was to take place the next day on Sunday.....which also had an impact on the tournament, as Justin, Zach, and Neil had been promised that their matches would take place on Saturday, so that they would not have to do double duty. It would be a full weekend, both good and bad.

Author's Note: I made a slight boo-boo at the end of the last chapter when I said that Neil MacCauley was the last pro-Dark student left in the tournament. I have all but said in previous chapters that Zach Smith is Dark as well, I just have not done anything with him other than knock him out in a Quidditch game. This is what I get for not starting the story until December, when I would only have seven months to write it.....if I had a year to write it? Well it would be even more detailed and the supporting characters would have a lot more to do. Anyway, Zach has not been officially unmasked as pro-Dark to the other characters in the story.....yet.

Monday, February 24th, 1997

Room of Requirement, Hogwarts

8:30 pm

The meeting of Harry with the second year Gryffindor students had been delayed a week so that he could get the equipment necessary for a few demonstrations. Seamus' father (Malcolm), having received his son's owl, had not only recommended a good store to purchase the bows and arrows at, he had personally gone there and picked out the kind of bows that he felt would be best for the ages (and genders) of the kids who would be using them. Fred and George both had met him there and wound up going to the Finnegan house for dinner that night at Malcolm's insistence.....as he had heard quite a bit about them from Seamus. They went through their trunk that night with quite the load, twenty shrunken bows and about one hundred arrows. Harry had a few sets of them beside him as he began to make his pitch. In front of him were all eleven second year students from his House, plus Daniel Garcia and Xavier Jones, Seamus and Dean were standing off to the side (Harry having muted all of the Listening Charms, yes they were still there).

"I know a lot of you have come up to me over the last few months, asking if you could be let into the DA. Much as I wanted to say yes, I could....or rather I 'would' not allow it. One reason is that in some ways, the DA is already too big. I would be hard pressed to give names to the faces of at least three dozen members right now, and I don't like that. Another is that Dumbledore and the rest of the faculty,

except probably Professor Bliss, would not look too kindly on me teaching any advanced spells to kids your age.....in their defense I suppose they want you to be kept out of the war and not have to worry about it." He paused for a moment and let his words sink in a little bit.

"When I was twelve, there was no war going on, not really. Everyone thought and assumed that Voldemort was still gone, that I had killed him when I was a baby. We had different worries back then, my friends and I, but they were more individual and personal ones. I would do anything if I could not be making the request I am about to make to you, but.....alas, we are all just players in an ever changing game. Now all of you know that the DA is there to help train you to fight with your wands, and to defend yourselves from other wands. While I still don't want you to have to face any Death Eaters with your wands, there is another way you can help us." Thirteen eager faces leaned forward, very interested to hear what was coming after all of that buildup.....which was the whole point, Harry was priming the pump.

"There are some of us, I won't say who but you can readily guess a few of them, who are making plans to defend the castle in case of an invasion (quite a bit of sucked in breath at hearing that). Now I, along with Seamus and Dean here, have thought of a way that you can help the rest of us, while not actually having to use your wands and vastly increase your chances of getting killed. You would not be members of the DA officially, but would be your own separate unit." Roy Figgar had a question as Harry paused for a second.

"You mean just us? Or us and the other second year students from Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin?"

"Good question Roy.....at the very least it would be you, and hopefully the other three Houses will join you. We are coming to you first, because there seems to be the most interest from this House in the DA and what we're doing. Every single third through seventh year student from our House joined the DA, and not one has dropped out. Now, how many of you are familiar with archery? Raise your hands if you are." Five hands were raised, all of which appeared to be from muggleborn students, though Harry could not be totally sure.

"Well that's more than I thought. Seamus, if you will." Seamus picked up one of the bows that Harry had laid along the north wall and fitted it with an arrow. He drew it back and let loose the arrow, which dug itself in the south wall. The other six students (who had not indicated that they knew what archery was) all seemed to be nodding as if to say 'ok, now I know what you're talking about.' Dean walked over and repeated the exercise, thudding his arrow a meter to the left of Seamus'.

"Now, what I want from you folks, as well as the second year students from the other houses, is to learn how to do what Dean and Seamus just did.....though most of you will not be firing at this close of a distance. What I'm going to have you do, once you're trained up a bit of course, is take places on the front two towers, and wait for the Death Eaters and their friends to come up to the front gate. With any kind of luck, your bunch will be able to loose two volleys before they have even figured out what happened." Roy interrupted him again.

"Are you talking about a Braveheart kind of thing Harry?" Two other heads nodded that they were thinking the same thing. After vaguely wondering what a twelve year old kid was doing watching a movie that violent, Harry answered him.

"Exactly Roy, a kind of frontline artillery if you will. You will, of course, have your wands with you, but you'll only need to use them if the battle goes seriously against us. I have to stress to you that this is just one aspect of what has now become a pretty detailed plan for defending the castle, and everybody has their parts in it.....other than the first years, who will be safely hidden away at a secured location.....except for Daniel and Xavier here, who we can all agree have proven their worth with their performances in the tournament." The two first years did nothing but smile, as they remembered not only Harry's lecture about bragging, but ones they had since gotten from Neville, and Professors Bliss and McGonagall. They took the lectures with good grace, and seemed flattered that people were taking such an interest in them. Sarah Owen had a question.

"Can girls shoot one of those things? It looks like it takes a lot of strength."

"Well we are going to find out tonight if you girls can or not, but I don't think it will be a problem. Women do this kind of thing in the muggle Olympics, and at some pretty young ages too." This seemed to satisfy Sarah and most of the other girls, though a couple looked a little dubious.

"Why don't you all have a try, each of you grab a bow. Seamus' father is pretty expert and he picked them out, so I think they'll work out fine." The thirteen youngsters all went up and grabbed a bow. Seamus took one too, and demonstrated how to hold it, while Dean showed them how to fit an arrow in and keep it in (which is harder than it looks by the way). The first six lined up and fired their arrows, all of which hit the south wall in some manner (Harry had adjusted the room to be about ten meters in each direction for the demonstration). The next seven did the same, and again all hit the opposite wall to varying degrees. Harry tried a few himself and quickly got the hang of it, though Dean and Seamus were still better. The kids spent about fifteen minutes happily firing away, and Harry felt that it was good as a stress reliever if nothing else, whatever defense value they got from it.

Once they had all fired a dozen or so arrows each, Harry had them stop for a moment. He closed his eyes and envisioned a room with a much higher ceiling and a south wall much further away. The kids were amazed to see the place transform into what Harry wanted (this was the first time for all of them in the Room). The three older boys all took their bows, fitted arrows into them, and angled their bows much higher than before. At Seamus' signal they loosed their arrows, and everyone watched as the three arrows flew in a parabolic arc and thudded down at three distinct spots on the far wall, twenty meters away.....to oohs and ahhs from the younger kids.

"Now imagine something like that, but shot from the top of the towers? I don't care how small you are, your arrow will hit something, and hit it hard. Now they won't be entirely accurate, but with forty of you shooting it won't matter too much."

"And we'll get to do that?"

"You bet Xavier, if you all want to. I'm not going to try and coerce anyone here into doing this.....but we would sure appreciate your help. So who's with me?" With that kind of appeal, no twelve year old kid could refuse him, and none did. All thirteen kids raised their hands, and the first company of archers was set.

"Thank you, all of you. Now Dean and Seamus will be your captains, they are my representatives here, and their word is law. They'll be training you at least once a week I hope, and I'm going to try to arrange at least one rehearsal from the towers themselves, though I'm still trying to work out the logistics of it. We already have some of the equipment bought, and the rest will be gotten after I talk to the other Houses, all you have to supply is yourselves and a good attitude. Oh, and one more thing: No one else outside the DA is to know about this. This includes teachers, first years, and anyone from another House you consider to be suspect. Dumbledore will have a fit if he finds out about it, and we can't be having that now can we?" He got another set of nods, and Harry privately felt that they would agree at this point to parachute off the towers if he asked them to. They left soon after, with Harry and the Map leading the way as to not get them all caught by any roving teachers or caretakers.

The next three recruitments went much as expected, as every Ravenclaw and Slytherin second year (the Slytherin second years were by this point all pro-Harry) agreed to be part of the Archers.....Hufflepuff continued to be the enigma, as just seven of the eleven of them signed on. Harry was prepared for this, and had Bill with him at that meeting to Obliviate knowledge of the Archers from those who refused. Justin had been there as well, but his pleas for House unity had fallen again on deaf ears with four of the kids. Harry simply reminded him that twelve year olds were hard to figure at the best of times (he and Justin had had their own difficulties with each other that year). The Archer brigade was now thirty-nine strong, and two practices a week were set up, Gryffindor and Slytherin on Tuesday nights, and Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw on Thursdays.

Saturday, March 1st, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

12:30 pm

The Great Hall was once again packed to the gills with students, teachers, and even a few parents. The night before at dinner, Bliss had explained that the three Quidditch players who were set to play their match the next day (Justin, Zach Smith, and Neil MacCauley) would be three of the names drawn automatically, though there was a chance that two of them would face each other. At the sixth year Defense class on Tuesday a lot of students had hung back afterward to ask how the draw was done. She told them that names were simply drawn out of a large mixing bowl the night before, by her and Professor Flitwick. If a seeded name came out, such as Ron's, then the next name drawn would only count if it were not another seed. If it was, the paper would be put back in the bowl and the process repeated. She knew what some of them were implying with their questions, and assured all of them that the draw was totally random within the rules, no exceptions were made to avoid potential matchups or to ensure them.

The first match was to be Neil MacCauley versus Colin Creevey. The two made their way to their starting positions and took their places. This was to be a match of unknowns really, as no one in the crowd knew what the seventh year Slytherin was capable of. He had waltzed through his first two matches pretty easily, defeating a first year Gryffindor and a third year Ravenclaw, while barely breaking a sweat, his third match was not much of a show either (against Liz Mullane, one of Luna's roommates). Harry and Ron had quizzed Jack Sloper about him, but all Jack really knew was that MacCauley was a talented student (fifth in his class, and a Prefect) who seemed completely uninterested in even speaking to someone who was not Slytherin, outside of Prefect business. Colin was now known more for being Hermione's boyfriend than anything else (to Harry's everlasting gratitude), but his Council duties had given him a confidence that improved his class rank to eleventh (quite high for a muggleborn who was not a complete brain. For example, in the sixth year top ten, only Hermione and Harry were muggleborn/raised).

After all that buildup, the match did not last that long. Colin was in control the entire time, and adopted the same tactic that Mandy Brocklehurst had against Xavier, very gradually herding MacCauley

into the southwest corner of the dueling area, dodging all of the spells that the seventh year was throwing at him.....though none of them included Reducto, as he had gotten a very stern talking to from Professor Shepherd about using it. Shepherd, with his customary subtlety, framed it as a matter of needlessly antagonizing the rest of the school, not when there were other spells that were just as effective. Neil, who Shepherd claimed was the most reasonable of the seventh years, took the advice at face value and seemed to agree. Colin eventually took care of him with a point blank Stupefy from three meters away. He walked off to the somewhat muted cheers from the crowd (a byproduct of Hermione), and MacCauley got a nice hand as well, more due to the fact that he had not tried to cheat and did not insult anyone in the process.

The next two matches followed in quick succession as Padma Patil defeated Natalie MacDonald rather easily, flummoxing the younger girl with a series of minor hexes that Natalie couldn't easily reverse. After that match, Terry Boot defeated Seamus easily as well, Seamus just did not have the power or the tactical ability to defend himself against Terry. Harry watched both of those matches with a kind of resignation that he knew would be there for the rest of the tournament, having to choose which friend to root for, if only in his own mind.....he was very careful not to take public sides in any match not involving Luna, Ron, Ginny, or Neville.

Match four of the day was a tight one between Theo Nott and Michael Corner in which the two boys stood toe to toe in the middle of the room and loosed hex after hex at each other, neither of them doing much in the way of dodging. By Bliss' later account, Theo was hit with eleven minor jinxes and hexes, while Michael got nailed with nine. Eventually though, Michael's superior stamina (he was a Beater on the Ravenclaw squad) won out and he hit Theo with one hex too many, causing him to double over in a bit of pain, where after Michael was able to Stupefy him on his second try.....Theo having fallen to his knees briefly and unintentionally ducking the first one. They shook hands wearily afterward, and walked off the floor together to watch the rest of the round.

And watch they did, or at least Michael had to, as he watched his still girlfriend Cho wipe out Parvati Patil in less than a minute in match five. Parvati seemed nervous right from jump, and barely got off a couple of spells before Cho had her in full retreat, ending the match with a relatively long distance Stupefy. Harry watched this match loving the irony of it all, his first crush dueling his first date. He was privately rooting for Parvati, but clapped loudly at the end just like everyone else.

Justin got the very short straw in match six, as he faced off against Ron.....who, while he liked Justin, never had stopped needling him for his suspicions about Harry during second year. The needling was good natured mind you, but every once in awhile Ron would throw a zinger at his friend, just to remind him. Harry explained it to Justin as Ron's guilt over his abandonment of Harry during fourth year, and his determination that he would protect his friend against any injustice, real or perceived. Justin understood this, or so he said, and would invariably say just one word in response to Ron: 'Hermione', which would usually shut the redhead up.

This was another patented Ron match, as he put up his shield and slowly advanced on Justin. This was an advanced shield that he, Harry, and Neville had been working on during their invasion prep, and he wanted to give it a try now. Ron was extremely proud that people thought of him as the top seed (though in reality, Terry Boot had the second highest OWL score in Defense), and wanted desperately to win the tournament and make his mark. He was able to remain dispassionate though, and did his best to treat every match like a chess game. He carefully maneuvered his fellow Keeper toward the side of the room that held all of the Slytherins, who easily picked up what Ron was after and started taunting Justin like crazy (pro-Darks hated Hufflepuffs on principle, while the pro-Lights just happened to like Ron better for the most part). This distracted Justin long enough for Ron to Petrify him, take his wand, and do a quick Stupefy.....after which he immediately woke his friend and helped him to his feet. Justin groused good naturedly about being dumb enough to be distracted, but was soon laughing about it in the crowd. Ron breathed a visible sigh of relief, and was into the next round.

Match seven was another battle of unknowns, as Stephen Cornfoot, the sixth year Ravenclaw Keeper, battled Tracey Davis, Neville's girlfriend. Tracey had chosen not to take Defense this year, to her everlasting regret when she found out about the tournament. She practiced some with Neville, but had proven only competent in the subject. Cornfoot was considered by most to be just another Ravenclaw brain, one of many, and had not made much of a noticeable impact during his six years at Hogwarts. Once again a match turned on fitness, as the Ravenclaw Keeper (all four November Keepers competed this day: Ron, Justin, Theo, and Stephen) continually kept moving and never seemed to stand still, yet still was able to shoot off just as many spells as his more stationary opponent....and a lot of spells were shot off in their seven minute duel, arguably the most spells per minute so far in the tournament. The difference of course, was that Tracey was always just missing Stephen, as she was not able to pin down just where he would be, his movements were that erratic. Eventually though, the barrage of spells that she was firing wore her down, and thus so did the rate, which allowed the fitter Cornfoot to nail her with a mid-range distance Stupefy while she was trying catch her breath.

The last match of the day by definition had to include Zacharias Smith, since he had to play Quidditch the next day. His opponent would be Hermione., and the announcement caused quite the stir in the crowd (match-ups were no longer announced one match earlier, the two competing now found out and had one minute to prepare). This was another Hermione match where she was the favorite of the crowd, though again not by much. Zach Smith, after his aggressive attitude the previous year, had been much more subdued in this one. He chose not to participate in either the Exec Council or the DA, but did not overtly hassle anyone who did. Justin had his suspicions that Zach was part of the reason for the Hufflepuff apathy toward the DA (Justin had conned three younger students into joining since the start of Winter term, but his House was still lagging behind even Slytherin in terms of overall DA numbers), but nothing could be proven, and Smith was not giving him anything to work with. More than a few people just figured that Smith was pulling a quiet Hermione, and trying to stay out of things and survive until graduation.

The two duelists bowed to each other, and then to everyone's surprise, Hermione went on the attack immediately.....surprise being the whole idea. Hermione had watched the last seven matches and seen one very key thing: if a duelist was clearly in better physical condition than their opponent, they won.....the only exception, ironically, being her own boyfriend. She knew that she could never match Zach's endurance, and the entire field was aware of her own deficiencies there, so she decided to end the match as quickly as possible.....she thought, how tough could Zach be, not even being in the DA? (though he was taking Defense)

Well he was tough enough apparently, as he put up a pretty good shield that deflected Hermione's shots with little trouble.....and she had hit with five of her first six hexes in a nice display of precision. The problem for her was that his shield was also deflecting the hexes right back at her, not merely absorbing them. This type of shield was a pretty advanced one, and took a large amount of energy to sustain. She managed to dodge them though, and also to fight down the rising sense of panic inside her, as she had hoped that her initial barrage would give her the edge. She kept firing at Smith, and he only managed to dodge about half of them, deflecting the rest with his shield. Hermione inched up on him as she kept firing, but the frustration mounted as she wasn't doing any damage to him.....even the few times she used Stupefy he would just get out of the way.

Within about five minutes, Hermione had gotten within three meters of Smith (they start ten meters apart), and then it happened: He dissolved his shield and seemed to slump down to his knees from exhaustion. Hermione readied herself for the coup de grace, almost not believing that her tactics had worked after all, and she moved forward another meter. Smith changed everything with his next move, as he whipped his wand up and hit Hermione square in the right leg with a very powerful Reducto. The crack of bone splintering could be heard throughout the Great Hall, as Hermione went down screaming in agony. Smith slowly got his feet, no longer needing to feign exhaustion as he used Accio to get her wand. Cradling it in his off hand he stood over Hermione and smiled cruelly as he listened to her crying.

This part of the action was taking place very close to the east wall, and Hermione would always be grateful for that, as three of the spectators along that wall, in front, were Harry, Neville, and Ron. They had watched Smith and his shield closely during the match, and were impressed in spite of themselves, but they were still outwardly cheering for Hermione when Smith did his business on her. As Smith got to his feet, something in his eyes looked very wrong to Harry, and he slipped his wand into his hand. Seeing this, the other two boys did the same as they listened to the crowd calling on Smith to put Hermione out of her misery and end the match.....something he was not doing quite yet. He put his own wand in his teeth and proceeded to snap hers, drawing gasps from everyone in attendance, and prompting Shepherd (the referee) to come forward, looking like he was going to end the match himself, perhaps on a disqualification. He did not get the chance though, before Smith raised his wand at Hermione and got out one word of the spell he was planning to use:

Avada

Hermione's life was saved by the reaction times of her three erstwhile friends as they, in unison, yelled:

Stupefy!

They all hit Smith in the back at point blank range from three meters away, fortunately before he could get more than half the word 'Kedavra' out of his mouth. He was slammed forward and slumped to the ground unconscious, and his wand clattered to the ground in a manner that was clearly heard by the dead silent crowd of over 275 students and faculty. Hermione was still crying very loudly as the Trio hopped over the retaining wall and walked over to the two students lying on the ground. When it became clear that the 'adults' in the room were too stunned to do much, Harry fired off a quick Stupefy at Hermione, which silenced her. This did get a reaction from Colin, who snapped out of it enough to go over the wall himself and looked ready to launch himself at someone, he just could not decide between Zach or Harry. Harry could see this, and had never felt more contempt for Colin than he did at that moment. Neville and Ron felt the same, and Neville gave voice to what they were all thinking, his tone of voice dripping with anger and sarcasm:

"You would have preferred to let her lay there in agony? At least someone around here was thinking." This stopped Colin, as he saw the Trio standing there, wands still in hand with very pissed off expressions.....though whether they were madder at Smith or Colin was open to debate, and the fifth year chose not to find out. For reasons that no one knew at the time, neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall had not been at the matches, and someone was sent to fetch them as Shepherd, Bliss, and Flitwick conferred as far away from the students as they could get. They returned after about a minute, none of them looking pleased (one would hope not), as Bliss used some magical ropes to tie up Zach Smith, who was still very much unconscious due to the three Stupefy spells. Shepherd had an announcement to make to the assembled students, as Dumbledore and McGonagall came hurrying into the Great Hall.

"It is the decision of the three referees that Zacharias Smith is to be disqualified, and Hermione Granger is declared the winner. This is not due to her injuries, but due to the snapping of her wand, and the fact that there is only one spell in creation that uses the word 'Avada'. What happens to Mr. Smith is to be decided by the Headmaster, the second half of this round will take place tomorrow as scheduled. There are twenty-four participants left, and I am warning each and every one of you: A repeat in any way of what happened just now, and you will regret it for the rest of your days." If it was possible, the crowd got even quieter, no one had ever heard the soft spoken Potions Master sound like that.

While he was saying this, Bliss and Flitwick were apprising Dumbledore and McGonagall of what had happened. There were actually tears in McGonagall's eyes as she rushed over to Hermione, who thankfully was still out of it. She looked over at the Trio, and silently mouthed 'thank you' as she used Moblicorpus to levitate Hermione and lead her off, presumably to Madam Pomfrey and the Hospital Wing. Pomfrey's services had not yet been needed once throughout the tournament, and had decided not to attend, as this kind of thing didn't interest her.

The Headmaster stayed behind, and got the Trio's version of events, the only difference from the professors' story being why they had their

wands out. Ginny, Luna, and the rest of their group had quietly come up to them as well, listening to what they said.

“That was good thinking you three, and good reactions. I have no doubt that Miss Granger owes you her life. Harry, I know you told her that you boys would protect her, regardless of the dissolution of your friendship.....if I ever had doubts that you are a man of your word, they are gone now. Two hundred points to Gryffindor by the way.” Harry supposed he should be flattered, but once again was insulted that his own good intentions were being congratulated just for existing. He badly wanted to duel someone right this minute, to let off some steam, but managed to keep control of himself for the time being.....though the urge to kill Smith was lightly burning in him.

“What will happen to Smith now sir?”

“We are going to have a talk with him of course, and find out what he was thinking when he attempted what he did. I imagine that you would like to be in on that questioning, but perhaps it would be best if we just had teachers questioning him. What happens in my office will be brought up at Mr. Smith’s trial, and I think it best that your name is not brought up any more than it needs to be.” Much as Harry would have liked to argue the point just for the hell of it, he happened to agree with the old man. He knew that Bliss and Shepherd would tell him everything that was said anyway, so he figured it would not hurt to throw Dumbledore a bone on this one. He checked his watch, it was still just 1:30 in the afternoon.

“Whatever you say Headmaster, this isn’t any of my business any longer, until the trial at least. Are we still going to Hogsmeade today?” Dumbledore flinched at the mention of Hogsmeade, he had quite forgotten about it. He turned to the crowd, none of whom had left yet.

“The Hogsmeade day is still to happen, all those wishing to visit the village, please be waiting by the front doors by 2:00 pm. All first and second years are to return to their Common Rooms, though they are of course free to use the library or to go outside once the upper years have left (this edict had been in force since the discovery of Dennis Creevey in the DA last year, he had snuck out with everyone else).” By now, all of the teachers had come into the Great Hall and

supervised the herding of the students out the doors, which took a bit of time, since many of them were still trying to rubberneck the scene inside the dueling walls.

Harry was halfway to the door when he suddenly had a thought and returned to the dueling floor. Under the curious gazes of the teachers, he did a quick search of Smith, though for what he did not say. He then rejoined the others, and his group went to their own Common Rooms, to get ready for their day in Hogsmeade. Colin immediately went to the Hospital Wing to visit Hermione, while Dennis hurried up to Harry.

"Look, he didn't mean anything by that Harry, he was just upset." Harry had calmed down considerably, and he rationally knew that he would have reacted much as Colin did if it had been Luna lying there.

"I know Dennis, it's fine."

"For my part, I want to say thank you to you guys, for doing what you did. I know my brother will do the same."

"You're welcome Dennis, we'll see you later." That was as close as Harry would get to saying 'get lost', but the message was received, and Dennis sped on ahead to the Common Room. Harry and company were noticeably quiet until they got to Gryffindor Tower, and quickly hopped into the trunks, where they met in Harry's.....after first calling the twins and Bill to get them in there (Charlie typically was working on Saturday afternoons). After hearing the story, Bill leaned back and closed his eyes in thought.

"Well you were there, what do you think Smith was up to?" Before Harry could answer, Anthony had a question (he, Terry, and Blaise had come with the boys to Gryffindor Tower, as that was their only trunk access):

"Hang on a second, I have a question.....when you searched Smith at the end there, you were hunting for a portkey weren't you?"

"I was, yeah.....and I didn't find one either, which means that he wasn't planning on escaping." Luna immediately figured out what that had to mean:

"Do you think he was under Imperius? He had to know that he could not fight his way out of the room, yet he was about to kill Hermione anyway." This made sense to Bill, who had another query:

"Does anyone know of any special reason why he might want to kill Hermione on his own? Between all of you there should be at least one person in every one of her classes." Actually Lisa and Terry were in all her classes by themselves, and they couldn't think of any confrontation between the two of them.....or any involving Hermione or Smith with anyone else period.

"Why didn't you make a harder push to be part of the questioning of him? He might have caved if you had insisted."

"I'm not worried about that Ron, there's nothing I could have asked him that Bliss and Shepherd won't think of.....and they'll tell us everything that goes on in there anyway. Better to let Dumbledore have his Headmaster moments to himself. He was right in a way, we don't want my participation to come out at trial, like I'm more important around here than I'm supposed to be.....there will be enough talk about why I was one of the three who nailed Smith." The group sat there and pondered this for a moment, and let the entire situation sink in. Neville finally stood up and began to go to the fireplace.

"C'mon folks, there's nothing we can do about this now, so let's get ready for Hogsmeade. We'll check on Hermione when we get back.....one more thing, we don't know if this was an isolated incident, so no one walks around Hogsmeade today without at least three other people. If that interferes with any romance, so be it, but our number one priority around here is to be safe." Heads nodded all around, as everyone went their separate ways to get ready.

1:50 pm

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts faculty Order members assembled in the Headmaster's Office, along with Professor Sprout (Smith's Head of House). Smith was seated in front of Dumbledore's desk, still trussed up and very unconscious. After a floo call that brought Madam Bones into the office, everyone sat down. The old man explained the situation to Bones, and they all eyed Smith for a moment. Hagrid went over and poked him in the shoulder, but the sixth year was still out of it. Bliss shook her head.

"Don't even bother Hagrid, those were three very powerful stunners that he was hit with, at very close range. If we don't wake him up ourselves, he'll probably be out until dinner time at least. Minerva, how is Hermione doing?"

"Poppy is still working on her, she is debating right now whether or not to just remove all the bones from her right leg and used SkeleGrow, or to use some healing potions and see what that does. As soon as this is over I'll go see her parents and let them know what is going on."

"That's good to hear Minerva.....now we should get on with this, some of you will need to be going with the students to Hogsmeade, this might not be the only incident today. Charles, there is some Veritaserum in that small cabinet over there (Shepherd retrieved a small vial of the potion, he regularly supplied such vials to the Headmaster, though he never asked questions about what he could be using all of it for). Melissa, please wake up Mr. Smith." Bliss had to use the waking up spell twice before it fully worked, and Smith shook his head a few times before he figured out where he was.....and instinctively struggled against his bonds for a few seconds before he calmed down.....long enough for Shepherd to administer the truth potion. Once it took effect, Dumbledore handled the initial questions, as Smith was looking pretty groggy now.

"Where are you right now Zacharias?

"In your office, Headmaster."

"Do you remember why you are here?"

“I tried to kill Granger.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Draco told me to.” This was a surprise to be sure, as far as anyone in the office knew, Malfoy had not been inside Hogwarts since the train ride in December.

“When did he tell you this Zacharias?”

“In December, in the library, right before we got on the train.”

“Did he know about the tournament before the announcement?”

“He did, he overheard Bliss and Shepherd talking about it.”

“What were his instructions exactly?”

“He told us that if we got a chance in a match against Potter, Granger, Longbottom, or the Weasleys, that we should kill them by whatever means necessary. He did not know that Potter wouldn’t be in the tournament though.”

“Who is we?”

“Touchet, Miller, MacCauley, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and me.” There wasn’t a teacher in the room who didn’t know about Theo Nott’s defection to Harry, and they all breathed a sigh of relief that Nott had not faced any of the targeted students. Bones was not in the know about every little Hogwarts detail however, and looked confused at the collective sighing, but McGonagall mouthed to her that it would be explained later.”

“Did Mr. Malfoy ever use the word ‘Imperio’?”

“Yes he did, right before he gave us our instructions.” There it was, now the criminal case against Smith was all but gone, and there remained the question of what to do with him at school. While Dumbledore was thinking about this, Bliss interjected with a few questions of her own.

“How long have you been friends with Draco Malfoy?”

“Since September.”

“What led to this friendship?”

“We both hate Potter and his pals, and Draco convinced me that our Lord would value my services.”

“Are you a Death Eater?”

“Not officially, I don’t have a Dark Mark or anything.”

“Were you involved in the beatings of the first years last fall?”

“Yes I was, it was mostly Crabbe and Goyle and me who did them, though Draco would usually watch and then do the memory charms afterward.”

“How many students did you beat up?”

“I don’t know, I lost count after awhile.”

“Were you under Imperius while you did this? Or did you do it of your own free will?”

“I did it because I wanted to, it was fun.”

“Were there any others involved in beating up the first years besides yourself, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle?”

“No.”

“Why did you do all that?”

“Because we could, and for some fun.”

“When Draco put you under Imperius in December, was that the only time you have been under that particular spell?”

“It was the only time.”

“Would you have tried to kill Miss Granger otherwise?”

“Not like that, not in public at least. If I caught her in the hallway alone I might think about it, or in Hogsmeade.” Bliss was disgusted with what she heard, and had no further questions. Nor did any of the other teachers, and Bones would get her chance if she decided to press charges.....which she did. Curiously, no one thought to ask Smith what he planned to do after he killed one/any of his targets, none of them had realized what Harry’s search was all about.

“Zacharias Smith, you are hereby under arrest for assault, with multiple counts. Further charges for today’s events will be determined at a later time. Do you have anything to say before I bring you in?”

“You can do whatever you want to me, but Lord Voldemort will make slaves of all of you before too long.” There was nothing to be said to this really, as Dumbledore took out a preprogrammed portkey that would take Bones and Smith to the Ministry, so he could be processed.

“Albus, I’ll be in touch with the details of his trial. Is it safe to assume that he is expelled from Hogwarts?”

“Yes Amelia, the beatings alone would deserve that. I will have his things sent home after his parents are notified. Will you do that or shall I?”

“I’ll do it, I know his father a little bit.....besides, it should come from the Ministry. I have your leave to tell the parents what he confessed to?”

“Of course Amelia.” Bones said her goodbyes and used the portkey to transport her and Smith into the main Ministry holding area, where thirty minutes later he was processed and in a holding cell.

“Melissa, Charles, please join the other faculty members on Hogsmeade patrol, I believe the others are already in the village (it

was now 2:15)." The two young professors left the office, followed closely behind by Sprout, who was going to check on Hermione. This left Dumbledore, Hagrid, Flitwick, and McGonagall.

"Albus, do you really believe that Hogsmeade is in danger? Maybe we should all go there."

"No Filius, I think it will be pretty quiet there today. Voldemort is too worried about thinning out our squib population, and the students are already cautious enough to be traveling in groups. I'm more worried about reprisals here at Hogwarts, and what else Messrs. MacCauley, Miller, Touchet, and Nott have been told to do, that perhaps Zacharias did not know about. I know that Draco Malfoy is beyond our reach for now, but we must find out how far his reach extends here into Hogwarts. Minerva, when was the last time the alarms on the Honeydukes passage were disturbed?"

"I cannot recall off the top of my head, though it has not been this calendar year. As far as I know, Potter has not used it once since he arrived in September." So they did know about it, and in a far more detailed way than Harry had ever feared.

"Well at least Mr. Malfoy has not been able to access the school, and you cannot send an Imperius through a letter.....Minerva, make sure there is a guard on Miss Granger until she leaves the Hospital Wing. That is in addition to Colin Creevey and his brother, who are to be allowed unfettered access to her while they are not in class, if she is in there that long. We will question the four Slytherin students when they come back from Hogsmeade." With that, the teachers separated. McGonagall to the Hospital Wing, Hagrid to patrol the grounds outside, and Flitwick back to his office to do some essay grading.

Hogsmeade itself was looking grand this day, as the shopkeepers had spruced things up in anticipation of the kids visiting today. Harry and his gang met up in the village, as the carriages disgorged all of the students.....the only ones who appeared not to be there were Hermione (obviously), Colin, and Zach. Dennis was there with his friends from third year, though he was not smiling and laughing as much as he usually did. The gang all headed to Honeydukes, as Ron, Lisa, and Daphne all had birthdays coming up in the next two weeks,

and the others in the group acceded to their joint request to just get them candy this year.....Ron in particular had ordered Harry not to buy him anything that he could not eat, though Harry was welcome to throw in some pizzas if he had a mind to, he didn't have to stick to candy. The others agreed to this plan, though it was tacitly acknowledged that Susan, Terry, and Blaise (as the girlfriend/boyfriend/boyfriend of the three) were free to do what they liked, present-wise. Harry simply held a bag open and Ron put his choices in it.....though not before Harry shoved a Cockroach Cluster in Ron's mouth and made him chew on it a long time (helped by the fact that Anthony and Blaise held Ron's mouth closed, while Justin grabbed him gently by the throat and wouldn't let him swallow). Ron was seen spitting outside most of the rest of the day, and vowing revenge on his new enemies in very graphic terms.....especially after telling everyone how pissed he was that he hadn't thought of it first to do to Harry, as neither of them liked Cockroach Clusters in the slightest.

The Death Eaters took the day off, and did not bother the kids' day out in the slightest. Voldemort was still in his initial planning stages for the Hogwarts invasion, and while Hogsmeade was a tempting target, he felt that a few political moves were necessary before wholesale butchery was to begin. What happened at the end of the afternoon was not on his orders, and when informed about it afterward, he was as surprised as anyone.....something he really did not like to have happen.

Bliss and Shepherd were on patrol duty, along with Professors Hill, McDowell (Runes), Vector, and Sinistra out in the open, and ten or so Order members hidden. They did not expect to find any trouble, as there had been little Death Eater activity dealing with wizards, just squibs.....and they both agreed that Voldemort could have Filch anytime he wanted him, all the bad man had to do was ask and they would deliver the grouchy caretaker.

It was 5:00 pm, with half an hour left until the carriages left for school. They were doing a walk around the outskirts of the village, looking behind buildings and in dark corners.....though that was more to stop any physical romance than a worry about Dark activity. They were a dozen meters or so from the Hogshead Pub when Shepherd

was stopped by a couple of his fourth year Gryffindor students with a question about a Potions essay they had due the next Tuesday. He stopped to chat with them for a minute, answering their queries with his customary patience, and being a bit embarrassed at how grateful they were that he was so nice about it (this was after three years of indoctrination by Snape, who discouraged any and all questions no matter where he happened to be standing at the time). Bliss slowed her walking pace down, but did not stop as she was bored senseless by Potions. She smiled at seeing the Hogshead, like most Hogwarts students she had braved a visit there when she was a fifth year, an occasion that marked her first drink of firewhiskey. She heard a noise and casually went around back to investigate it, something she might have done anyway without the noise.

What she came upon was the sight of three older students beating up what appeared to be a pair of little kids.....she got a little closer and saw that it was Sean Touchet, Matthew Miller, and Neil MacCauley doing the beating, and that the victims were a pair of third year Slytherin boys who were known to be on Blaise's side of the fence. She got all of this processed in about two seconds, and was about to raise her wand.....

CRACK!

Bliss' world went black and she fell hard to the ground, bleeding from a large head wound, caused by the beater bat of Trevor Miller, Matthew's brother, who had been standing guard in the shadows behind the building (though he had been promised some fun after the older boys were done). The crack was loud enough to get the attention of the three Chasers, and they quickly came over to investigate. Touchet looked giddy with glee when he saw their prize.

"Oh man, you really nailed her Trevor, that's a lot of blood." He flipped her over roughly and saw who it was. MacCauley went pale as he was the first to speak:

"That's Bliss guys.....we're in deep trouble now, I know she saw us." Touchet had an answer for that:

"So we take care of her then, kill her. Our Lord will thank us when he finds out." Nobody seemed to thrilled with that idea, but there didn't seem to be another option. The third year boys were both unconscious, and wouldn't be awake to tell anyone who killed the Defense teacher. Touchet figured that they didn't have much time, so he started things off by kicking her viciously in the ribs. The others shrugged and started putting the boots to her as well, with Trevor (who liked her least of the four boys) getting some punches in as well.

This only lasted about thirty seconds, as Shepherd came upon them, his two fourth year students in tow. They had heard the crack while they were talking, and Shepherd figured it was Melissa getting some target practice in or something with a tree.....but when he heard nothing from her he began to panic, and started running toward the pub. The two kids, Gary Fleder and Scott Rosenberg, looked at each other and followed behind him.

Shepherd saw the assault, which stopped as the four goons looked up at the newcomer to the party. He instinctively raised his wand and stunned Matthew Miller, the nearest to him. The other three attackers didn't have their wands out even, but didn't get a chance to fix that as Fleder and Rosenberg, both Harry-trained as members of the DA, quickly stunned them. Shepherd then saw who it was that was lying on the ground, bleeding from multiple wounds and his heart almost broke. He ran to her and checked her pulse, praying to a God he had never asked much of before.....thank God, she was still breathing, though her pulse was pretty weak. Like most Hogwarts students, he had taken the Magical Healing class that was offered in seventh year, but there didn't appear to be any curse marks on her. He pointed his wand straight up and shot up red sparks, the code for danger.....yes, taken directly from the third task during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He found his voice, and noticed two more bodies lying unconscious a few meters away.

"Gary, check on those two, see if they're all right. Scott, go find Harry Potter and bring him here, hurry." He was still cradling her head in his arms as he wanted badly to start crying, but didn't dare. He used his wand for a moment to tie up the four goons, and waited for help to come.

It turned out that Harry and friends came first, as they were walking out of Dervish and Bangs nearby and could not help but hear Scott's screaming of his name as he ran down the street. All he explained to them was that Shepherd needed them right now, and he took off running back toward the scene. They followed after him and caught up just as Scott was rounding the corner of the Hogshead and they saw Shepherd holding Bliss. The eyes of all of them went wide as they took in what they were seeing. Before they could say anything, Hill and Sinistra came running up (Shepherd had done the danger signal again, which had alarmed them greatly). Harry managed to croak out:

"Is she.....I mean, she's....."

"She's alive yes, but we need to get her to the Hospital Wing. I couldn't leave the scene like this, and I don't have any way of getting her there as it is." Harry did though, he never traveled anywhere without at least three Skeleton Portkeys on him at all times, plus another couple regular ones that were programmed to take him to Dumbledore's office (per the deal) and the Ministry. He quickly whipped out a skeleton one and programmed it for the Hospital Wing. He gave the key to Shepherd, who with a grateful look on his face, teleported them away.

With him gone, no one really knew the full details of what happened, though they were easy to surmise from all the bodies still lying on the ground. Gary Fleder had been trying to wake up the two Slytherin boys on the ground, and succeeded eventually. They were not considered suspects at all once their injuries were noticed (black eyes and blood flowing from their noses and mouths) and Blaise of course vouched for them, as they were his guys, and members of the DA.

Ron was looking murderous, and along with Neville advanced on the four unconscious goons. Sinistra had the presence of mind.....and let's face it, the courage, to stop them. She was a bit nervous doing so, knowing that if Harry and company wanted some revenge, she and Hill could be easily taken care of. Harry agreed with her though, and stopped what could have been a lynching. They got as much of the story as Gary and Scott knew, as well as Tom and Randall, the

third year Slytherin victims. Harry took out his Headmaster's Office portkey and enlarged it so that hands from all four goons could be made to grip it. He activated it and took it right into a meeting between Dumbledore and Bones, who were again discussing the Zach Smith matter, this time about the trial details (as Dumbledore was still head of the Wizengamot). To say that the two older wizard/witch were surprised at the intrusion is one of life's understatements.

"What on earth is going on here Harry?"

"They attacked Professor Bliss, knocked her out somehow and started beating on her. She looked pretty bad sir, ma'am. Professor Shepherd portkeyed her into the Hospital Wing, that's where they are now. He had them tied up before we got there." Dumbledore could move quickly for someone over a century old, and leaped up to call Pomfrey on the floo. There was no answer at first, which worried all three of them even more. He loudly repeated his call, and Shepherd answered, in a shaky voice.

"Harry got back with them then? Poppy's working on her now, I think she'll live....." He couldn't take it anymore and started weeping. Dumbledore's eyes got as large as dinner plates and he leapt into the fire and flooed to the Hospital Wing. Harry stayed behind to relate what he knew to Madam Bones, and emphasized that Bliss was likely the only one who knew every detail.....except for the filth on the floor. Harry excused himself and flooed over to the Hospital Wing as well, where he found the rest of his gang (he wasn't the only one with some skeletons on his person) watching Madam Pomfrey use every trick in her vast arsenal to keep Melissa Bliss alive. A few beds over from Bliss was Hermione, with Colin next to her, and she was taking in the situation with no small amount of horror. Harry walked over to Hermione and explained what was happening, his longest conversation with her since the train platform in December.

Shepherd was standing mute next to Poppy as she worked. This had been a rare year of good health for the Hogwarts staff and students, so she had all the healing potions she needed and then some. She was flashing her wand at times, and forcing potions down Melissa's throat right and left. After about fifteen minutes she suddenly stopped,

and caught her breath for a minute before addressing the crowd.....none of whom remotely intended on leaving.

"It's out of my hands now, I've done all I can think of to do. I think she will be fine though. She has some broken ribs, and a few tiny skull fractures, and some internal bleeding. Individually I would say not to worry, but in concert.....well if she survives the next hour then she will be out of the woods. Now I know better than to ask you all to leave, but give her enough space so that she can get fresh air....and make sure none of you sit on Miss Granger's leg, I would prefer not to have to use Skele-Grow on her if I don't have to." Indeed, nobody left until a little after 7:00 pm, when Poppy said that everything was going fine, and that the patient would live. There was little talk in the room until then, though everyone in the room went up to Shepherd at some point and silently hugged him, whispering words of encouragement in his ear.....even Hermione, as she made Colin and Dumbledore lift her up out of bed so she could do it. After the announcement by Pomfrey, made to great joy and no small amount of happy tears, Dumbledore got to his feet.

"Ok kids, go up to the Great Hall and get your dinner. I will come up with you and explain what has happened, let's give Professor Bliss some time to rest. Thank you all for your concern, it says quite a bit about both you and the professor that you care about her so much." He left the room, followed by Colin and the rest of them.....except for Shepherd, who had no appetite for anything right now.....and the Trio, who stopped at Hermione's signal.

"I want to thank you guys, Professor Flitwick was down here and he says that you definitely saved my life. Harry, Ron, Neville.....I will always be grateful." Ron and Neville, worn out from the day's events, just smiled and each briefly squeezed one of her hands. Harry was no less tired himself, but was more used to managing his exhaustion.

"It was just one of the many we owe you in that regard Hermione. That was for the plant in first year, we still owe you for the pipes in second year, and the time turner in third year.....and I pray with everything I have that you never need to cash those in." In a different tone of voice, this could have been taken as a cold statement, something Ginny might have said to Hermione.....but Harry said it in

a gentle, almost wistful tone that made her cry. She mentally echoed Peter Tyson's thoughts from July: this was the oldest sixteen year old kid in the world. "Get some rest Hermione, you've had a rough day." He then turned and went to sit by Bliss' bedside, joined by Ron and Neville, as they did not want Shepherd to be left alone with his grief.

Bliss woke up on her own after another hour or so, though she was extremely groggy, to find both her hands being held, one by Charles and another by Neville. The four men were talking silently, and didn't notice for a few seconds that she was awake until she squeezed the hands holding hers. Her headache did not improve any with the cheers that the four let loose on seeing her awake, and they were loud enough to bring Pomfrey running in. She examined Melissa, found her to be improving, and ran to get Dumbledore.

Dumbledore had rarely looked so relieved in all his life, and had to be talked out of hugging his Professor by Neville's quick thinking reminder about her broken ribs. He settled for patting her on the leg (an undamaged area, one of the few on her). He halfheartedly chided the three boys for missing dinner, but all could tell that he didn't really mean it. The Trio sat with Bliss and Shepherd for the rest of the evening, Dobby and Winky bringing them all dinner. When Charles left briefly to use the bathroom, Bliss looked up at her three young friends.

"Thanks you guys, thanks for being here for me.....and being here for Charles too, someone might be dead otherwise." They nodded, and each gave her as close to a hug as they could dare with her injuries.

Headmaster's Office

9:00 pm

An extremely tired Dumbledore assembled Cho Chang, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Katie Bell, and Tony Caldwell (a seventh year Slytherin who had been appointed by Sean Touchet to the Keeper position and was representing his squad in this meeting) in his office. This had been arguably the worst day at Hogwarts since the death of Cedric Diggory, but the show still had to go on, and there was the next day's

Quidditch to think about, trivial as it might have sounded out loud. The address to the students during dinner had gone as well as could be expected, and he expressly told them that the Hospital Wing was off limits, so that Professor Bliss could get the rest she needed. He had looked around and did not see the Trio eating dinner, and correctly assumed that they were still in the Hospital Wing.

"I am happy to tell you that Professor Bliss has regained consciousness and is responding well to treatment, though she will be in the Hospital Wing for at least a week, recovering. There are no other students besides Miss Granger currently in there, and Madam Pomfrey will take good care of her. Messrs. Touchet, MacCauley, Miller, and Miller have of course all been expelled, and are being held at the Ministry, awaiting their trials.....for assault and attempted murder I believe, I would not expect to see them here again if I were you." There were nods from Cho, Katie, and Justin.....and nothing from Tony, who had been with his girlfriend all afternoon and had not even known anything was happening until after it was all over. He was a pro-Dark sympathizer though, as were all the seventh years.....who were now three fewer.

"Now the last thing I want to do is hold a Quidditch game tomorrow, but the rest of the students need their sense of normalcy after the events of this afternoon and there will be a great hue and cry if we postpone holding a match. Plus there is the matter of the exhibition game to take place in May, we need to complete our season so that our school team can be chosen. Given the chaos of today, as well as five players from tomorrow's teams being expelled today.....a record for one day, before any of you ask.....we need to decided what is going to happen. I have been prevailed upon by Professors Flitwick and Shepherd to continue the tournament, due in no small part to the fact that the rest of the participants all seem to get along with one another, alleviating the risk of another attempted murder (Cho and Katie, both still alive in the tournament, smiled tightly at hearing that). Now as for the Quidditch game, what I would like to do, is switch the two matches, and have Gryffindor and Ravenclaw play tomorrow, with Hufflepuff playing Slytherin next Sunday. This will give Slytherin time to replace the four players it has lost, and will give Hufflepuff a chance to get better used to Mr. Smith's absence as well. Now I know that this will be something of a hardship on the Gryffindor

and Ravenclaw teams, given less than fifteen hours to prepare.....but I think it is the best option. What are your thoughts? Miss Chang, Miss Bell, do you have any objections?"

Cho had no opinion either way really, and had assumed that a switch such as this one was at least going to be talked about as soon as she heard the news about the Slytherin four. Her team had three players left in the tournament, and all had dueled and won today. She knew rationally that this game was for the championship, since whatever team Slytherin threw out there the next two matches would be wiped out by Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, even with the four expelled players on the team.....and she knew that her squad could take out Hufflepuff with a championship on the line.

Justin, though, had an objection of his own, and voiced it.

"Well Headmaster I have to tell you that I for one am not willing to postpone the match tomorrow. I can sympathize in theory with the losses suffered by Slytherin today, replacing four members is no easy task, especially considering that they lost three players in January.....but that is what reserve teams are for, and I don't feel that we should be denied the easy victory that we deserve and would get, because of fairness to a team that lost four players that willfully almost killed a teacher, not to mention what they were doing when Professor Bliss came upon them in the first place. They should not be rewarded for all that by getting a delay. We lost Zach, yes, for good reason.....and we have Ernie MacMillan to replace him. Will we be as good? Of course not, but we are prepared to play. I know that Ravenclaw and Gryffindor have complete reserve teams, all of whom are ready to step in if necessary, half of the Gryffindor starters can even play multiple positions from what I understand. Slytherin should be the same way, they should have four players ready to go.....one way or the other." Cho and Katie nodded in agreement at this argument, while Tony Caldwell wisely stayed still and quiet. Katie had another point.

"I agree with Justin, both to his reasoning and to another. There was special effort made to get the Hufflepuff and Slytherin players still in the dueling tournament their matches today instead of tomorrow, so as not to needlessly tire them out, and I agreed with it then and

now.....but if you switch matches, I'll be penalized, since I still have to duel tomorrow. I know I don't relish the idea of dueling, even if I'm allowed to go first, then play a probably exhausting Quidditch game against Cho here. Jack Sloper duels tomorrow as well, and I honestly had not decided whether or not to use him against Ravenclaw.....so that option would be taken away from me. Plus, and this can't be stated enough: Slytherin should not be given a break for what happened today. I like some Slytherins I'll grant you, and I know that Justin is close with Blaise Zabini in particular (Justin nodded), but they don't deserve a chance to regroup, what happened today was too heinous." Cho was next.

"I guess I have to agree with Justin and Katie. We can be prepared to play tomorrow if we have to be.....but I think fairness dictates that the schedule be kept the way it is."

"Mr. Caldwell, you have been very quiet. What is Slytherin's position?" Caldwell had been appointed by Touchet to replace Theo Nott last month, and his only prior claim to fame was being one of the sixth and seventh year students who decided to sit out the tournament.

"Sir, I honestly don't care either way, and I speak for the other two holdover members as well. If I may be frank, we were going to be slaughtered anyway, even with the team we had yesterday, so it really does not make a difference when we play. I will tell you two things though: Number one, I personally do not condone what happened this afternoon, with Professor Bliss or with Granger; I respect Bliss, and while I don't like Granger one bit, she has done nothing that deserves being murdered for.....Second, if it is decided that Slytherin v. Hufflepuff goes tomorrow afternoon, we will have a full team assembled on the pitch, one way or the other." The other three students could not help but be impressed with the practicality of that little speech, and Dumbledore was smiling faintly as well.

"Well if that's what you kids want, then we will leave the match tomorrow as it is. I apologize to you Miss Bell, for not thinking of your own situation in the tournament. The game will go on as scheduled at 3:00 pm, as I doubt the eight duels will take any longer than that. You may return to your dormitories now, have a good night."

"Goodnight sir," they all said, more or less in unison. They exited the office and Caldwell immediately headed down to the dungeons, he had a three chasers and a beater to draft, presumably out of the few allies he had left. The other three hung back a bit, walking more slowly away. Katie, who disliked Dumbledore the most of the three, said what they were all thinking:

"What is that old bastard not telling us? Something smells here." Justin was right with her in that.

"We'll find out tomorrow night I'm sure, I imagine that Harry has already talked with Shepherd. At least all the nasties are out of the tournament, so you two and Hannah (his girlfriend) and all the others will be safe." Cho said goodnight, and offered this parting comment:

"Slaughter them tomorrow Justin, make a statement." She walked off quickly toward her Common Room, as Justin walked Katie back to Gryffindor before returning to his own dormitory. This had been a long day, and tomorrow still loomed.

11:00 pm

Slytherin Common Room

Shepherd assembled all of the Slytherin students in the Common Room and prepared to lay into them. He had never felt more hate in his entire life than he did right now, and while he knew most of his House was just as appalled as he was, he knew there were some who were quietly very pleased.

"I'm happy to tell you that Professor Bliss is going to be Ok, though she will be in the Hospital Wing for a time. Headmaster Dumbledore will teach Defense until she recovers fully, and her participation in the teacher dueling part of the tournament is in serious question. Now back in the fall I warned you people what would happen if any of you laid a hand on anyone in this House....." He only got that far before Pansy Parkinson made quite the large mistake.

"But sir, Professor Bliss technically is a Hufflepuff, and you never said....." She fell silent as Charles was in front of her in a flash, screaming in her face.

"SHUT UP PARKINSON! I swear by Merlin if you say one more word I'll take your wand and throw you in a room with the Gryffindor Trio.....and they can keep theirs! So keep your opinions to yourself you vile piece of filth! My best friend is lying in a hospital bed right now lucky to be alive because of your friends, so be grateful that I don't take out my anger and grief on your ugly little head.....don't tempt me." Charles somehow got a hold of himself after saying this and walked back to the middle of the room, and in a calm tone of voice, began again.

"Now where was I? Oh yes.....two of our students here, Tom and Randall, were assaulted by the four ex-Slytherins, and that violates my orders to you. This is the second time this has happened by the way, and while the perpetrators have already been expelled, and arrested.....I know there are some of you who are in agreement with what they did. Now I have said this before, and I will say it again for those of you too stupid, deaf, or arrogant to understand it the first time: I do not care what side you take in this war, but you will keep it out of here! If anyone of you has something to hide in that regard, I will give you until next weekend to make your arrangements to leave Hogwarts, I'll even give you a letter of recommendation to Durmstrang if you like, my uncle happens to be the Deputy Headmaster there. You have been warned. Now go to bed." He stalked off to his living quarters, and the students, while some were eyeing each other, did the same.

Sunday, March 2nd, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

12:30 pm

There was a greatly subdued air this day, as the events of Saturday still weighed heavily on everyone's mind. Professor Shepherd was now that main referee, with Professor Flitwick as his backup, and Shepherd announced the first pairing: Blaise Zabini v. Katie Bell.

Shepherd didn't feel the need to deliver any warnings about conduct, because like the Headmaster had said in his office last night, all the competitors today were friends.

The two of them took their places, and the match began. This proved to be a strange match, whereby the female competitor was stronger (muscle-wise), but the male competitor was more cerebral in his approach. Blaise decided to make this a long-distance duel, as he basically ran away from Katie the entire time, lobbing spells from a range of no closer than fifteen meters. There was no running on Sundays usually (there were still only the four of them doing it), but Blaise got his laps in, lightly loping around the edges of the dueling area as a frustrated Katie easily dodged everything he threw at her, but could not hit him either from such a long range. The crowd was getting a bit restless at Blaise's delaying tactics, but before the booing got too loud, Katie chose to make her attack. Without warning, she sprinted as fast as she could right at him, firing a couple of spells as her breath allowed.....which was just what he wanted, he carefully got his mark ready, and once she got close enough he popped her right in the head with a Stupefy.....just as she was getting ready to do the same to him. It was probably just as well that she was knocked out by the stunning spell, because her body snapped back and hit the ground hard, because of the change of momentum. Blaise woke her up and she walked very unsteadily off the dueling floor. As she passed him, Shepherd slipped her a vial of headache remover, and she drank it gratefully.

The next two matches went pretty quickly as Ernie MacMillan and Jack Sloper advanced to the next round. Ernie defeated Dean Thomas in a match notable only for it's sloppiness. Still, Ernie joined Ron as the only competitors to have defeated two Exec Council members.....even if they were not the cream of the Council crop in either case. Jack Sloper took out Anthony Goldstein in a match that was much like the Davis/Cornfoot match from the day before, featuring barrages of spells that left even Sloper exhausted by the end of it. Ginny broke from her preparations long enough to commiserate with her boyfriend, and whispered to him that his consolation prize that night would be worth it.

Harry got quite the scare watching the fourth match as Hannah Abbot grazed Luna with no fewer than three Stupefy spells over the course of their five minute match, knocking her down but not out every time. Hannah had not had a lot of confidence going in, and decided that she was going to go for a quick victory or a quick loss. Luna frustrated that by extending the match (she had taken a few yoga lessons from Bliss, and her conditioning was getting better all the time). Stupefy takes a bit of energy to produce, and if one fires a lot of them, it will wear the user down quite quickly. Hannah realized this a bit too late, and for a brief second let her arms drop to her sides in exhaustion. That was all Luna had been waiting for, and she hit her with three minor jinxes in quick succession, allowing her to close in for the final Stupefy.

The next match was another female/female contest, as Daphne Greengrass defeated Susan Bones in a match filled with more cautiousness. This was notable in the matches this day, as the friends all took care not to hurt one another.....Blaise in particular, since it was a male/female match yesterday that had proven to be the bad one, though nobody thought he would harm Katie either accidentally or on purpose. Daphne, another who had not bothered with Defense, thinking that Dumbledore would just hire another idiot, had nonetheless gotten the same instruction as all of the students in Bliss' class, through Blaise. She was fully expecting to take the NEWT exam fifteen months from now, and seemed like she had a much better idea of what to do than Susan did. Susan, like Parvati the day before, had just been glad to get to this round, and though she had been heartened by her draw (not getting Neville or a Weasley), she never really thought she could win.....and didn't, losing in about six minutes. The two girls hugged as they left the floor and were easily heard talking about plans to get together that night.

Neville was next, as he faced down Morag McDougall, and in a very macabre scene that left Colin fuming, Neville used the same shield that Zach used against Hermione.....to even greater effect as McDougall got hit with a few rebounded spells as Neville advanced forward. As he to within four meters of her, she managed to get off a stunner that hit the shield slightly, but did little to Neville except rock him back a bit.....to Morag's great surprise, as she had fully expected a direct hit for some reason. Neville did not so much as

recover as he simply stuck to his plan and managed to stun her with no further trouble. As Neville left the floor, Colin made a move to confront him, but was stopped dead in his tracks by Neville's opening verbal salvo:

"Shouldn't you be with your girlfriend right now? I could swear that she's in the Hospital Wing." Colin was there to give moral support to his brother, and Hermione was sleeping anyway, but the remark still stung badly. Neville fervently started hoping that he would get the fifth year boy in the next round, as Harry and Ron joined Tracey in congratulating him.

The seventh contest was announced as Lisa Turpin against her roommate Mandy Brocklehurst.....but the biggest smile in the room belonged to Ginny, as this contest meant that she would be facing off against Dennis Creevey in the last duel. Lisa had had her pride quite wounded by not being seeded (though Bliss had hinted to her that she had been the last cut during those debates), and worked very hard to win her matches in convincing fashion. Though she had not faced real quality opponents, her matches had only lasted about two minutes each, and this was no different. For the first time the 'Stupefy and nothing else' strategy paid off, as Lisa only fired seven spells, all stunners, and grazed Mandy with one, and hit her full on with another. Mandy, for her part, only managed to get off a couple of tickling charms before she was in full retreat, and the match ended at Lisa's usual two minute point. The sixth year girls in Ravenclaw were notable for their closeness, and the two of them walked off arm in arm.

Ginny and Dennis moved to the center of the dueling area, and Ginny had a confident smirk on her face as Dennis looked very determined. As soon as Shepherd signaled them to begin, Ginny charged the younger boy like a wild woman, firing a Bat Bogey hex at him as she followed it with a banshee cry at the top of her lungs. The bat hex Dennis had been reasonably prepared for, they were a Ginny trademark after all (though Anthony had used one in his second round match).....but the yelling and the charging forward unnerved him greatly, and he seemed to be a bit confused over what spell to fire off. This was no longer an issue once the bats got to him and he thoroughly lost his composure then, forgetting about Ginny entirely as he fought off the bats. She Accio'ed his wand and let the bats have

him for a few seconds before she ended the spell. Ginny paused then for a moment, as she let the hopelessness of the situation sink into his brain.....she then hit him with as powerful a stunner as she could bring forth, sending Dennis to the floor with a loud thump. She tossed his wand casually to Shepherd as she left the floor without looking back.

The field was now down to its Sweet Sixteen of: Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Colin Creevey, Hermione Granger, Michael Corner, Padma Patil, Terry Boot, Blaise Zabini, Cho Chang, Stephen Cornfoot, Ernie MacMillan, Lisa Turpin, Daphne Greengrass, Luna Lovegood, and Jack Sloper.

Ernie was notable as the only Hufflepuff remaining, and there was some joking that night in Exec Council about the four couples that were still alive and might have to face each other : Lisa and Terry, Cho and Michael, Hermione and Colin, and Daphne and Blaise. Nothing much official happened at the meeting, just a lot of free flowing discussion on what had happened over the weekend, including a lot of speculation over whether Hermione would be able to compete, and whether that would mean someone else being brought back into the tournament, or a lucky winner from this weekend getting a bye if she did not feel up to competing. Harry filled those who weren't there the night before on the talk with Shepherd, and the respect for the quiet Potions Master grew even more.

The Quidditch game also was talked about.....rather laughed about, if one is to be honest in the telling of this story. True to his word, Tony Caldwell, now the official Captain of the Slytherin side, had produced six other players at 3:00 pm, in addition to himself.....not one of whom had played in the November game against Ravenclaw, or in any other game that anyone could remember. Due to the method of choosing the teams over the years (bribery, cronyism), there had not been a lot of Quidditch players developed within Slytherin House. Blaise, now the leader of the largest (by far) faction of the House, had genuinely never liked playing, and his attitude was by no means solely his own, as Caldwell had had to put a lot of pressure on some of his friends to show up to play.....and he got enough to come, from the sixteen left that were thought to be pro-Dark.

Justin came into the match determined to run up the score if at all possible, and had told Megan Jones not to even think about catching the Snitch until the thirty minute mark at the earliest, which he did not think would be a problem given her talent and the lack thereof by Slytherin. Like Katie and Cho, Justin was very interested in getting as many Hufflepuff players onto the exhibition team as possible, and thought that Megan had a legitimate shot at the Seeker spot if Harry was chosen to play Chaser (as most thought he would be, as by far the dominant player at that position in November).

At the thirty minute mark the score was 230-10, and it was that close only due to Caldwell doing a yeoman's job as the Keeper. The lone Slytherin goal came on a penalty shot by new Chaser Ramsey Porter, a seventh year who had gotten fouled by an overzealous Ernie MacMillan. Justin mentally cursed Ernie for ruining his shutout, and reminded himself to have a talk with Peeves sometime soon about some punishment for his roommate. After Slytherin got on the scoreboard, Justin gave the signal to Megan to begin hunting for the Snitch. Even though they now had an insurmountable lead, Justin wanted the full blowout, so he urged Megan on as she took about ten more minutes to locate and grab the Snitch, during which the Hufflepuff Chasers scored eight more goals. The final score was 460-10, and the Hufflepuff rooting section was completely hoarse from all their cheering at the biggest Quidditch blowout in years.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was little bitterness from the pro-Dark Slytherins, and no threats or physical assaults were made. Most of their steam had been let out the day before when Touchet, the Miller brothers, and McCauley were nabbed in the act.....plus, they knew this was coming. Even Caldwell, the only player on their side who had played remotely competently, acknowledged that none of them were bona fide Quidditch players, and that they had had no chance, and that the game would end when Hufflepuff allowed it to. True to form from November, Blaise and his people were not there, so the Slytherin cheering section had been rather small.....though Blaise was floored when Caldwell had thanked him for not coming, and not rubbing it in that his people had gotten so thoroughly plastered. This sounded very odd until the Council that night, when

the three other Captains had told him of Tony's comments in Dumbledore's office.

Wednesday, March 5th, 1997

The beginning of Harry's week went very well from his perspective. Everyone got a sigh of relief when Hermione was released from the Hospital Wing on Tuesday, with the new bones in her leg doing their job just like Madam Pomfrey promised her they would. There was still no true closeness between her and her former friends, but even Ginny was saying hello to her first, if only grudgingly. The change in attitude came from Colin, who was starting to feel the shame of not being ready to help his girlfriend when she needed him.....even after she gently pointed out to him that Harry, Ron, and Neville had all been to battle and he had not, and were much more used to firing first and asking questions afterward. She was careful not to praise them too much (for the sake of Colin's ego), but did tell everyone who asked that she was enormously grateful for what they had done.

Also on Tuesday, Neville and Harry got their Apparition licenses, fully signed off on and executed. Biller somehow got the head of the Apparition Office to come to the Rowling School football pitch that night to test them personally, and they had passed with flying colors. Neville's crack had gotten much, much quieter since he had started, and Harry's was now down to the faintest whisper, though he told Sarah that he wouldn't be satisfied until he could do it silently, like she did. The three Aurors all received an invitation to the next Archer meeting, and Biller seemed pretty impressed with the idea, and promised to help Harry come up with a way to do at least one full dress rehearsal for it. All three Aurors made a trip to the Hospital Wing to see Bliss, and Biller promised her that her attackers were getting the worst treatment possible, including a daily beating themselves from whatever guard happened to be on the graveyard shift.

Wednesday brought more knife and karate training for Harry, in the longest session with Sensei Yamura yet, at just around three hours. Harry was not learning ninja style moves, but Yamura was showing him a few tricks, some simple some quite complicated, that were ideal for use in close quarters combat. John heard about the code

against guns and thought it was rubbish, he told Harry that if he really had to kill Voldemort, he should use whatever tools were necessary to get the job done, even if it meant breaking some silly tradition. Harry did not really disagree with him, at least not in his own mind.....but he knew that if he crossed the line, he would have to live as a muggle for the rest of his life, and he wasn't sure if he could handle that.....having tasted the big city life, he wasn't sure that he could go back to living on the farm (so to speak). What was also troubling, or would have been if he had shared it with anyone, was that Bill's private theory had been correct: Harry did not believe in the Prophecy, not really.....he thought quite honestly that Dumbledore could do the job if he really wanted to, but was too lazy or frightened to try, and was letting that idiot Trelawney's blatherings distract him from doing what was right. This was a dangerous attitude to take, and would potentially have tragic consequences later on.

Author's Note: A small screw-up that I noticed this week: I initially put a made-up character named Ray Figgar on the Gryffindor Reserve Quidditch Team.....and then a few chapters later started calling him 'Roy'.....sorry about that. The name in and of itself means nothing, I just conjured it out of thin air. On another matter, if the location of Smeltings has been given, I'm not aware of it, so I made up a place for it. Plus, I'm going to be a bit more specific in my describing the duels in this chapter, and while I'm sure there are official names for some of these spells, I'm not going to go to the trouble of looking them up. I will only go shot by shot for the last three duels of the tournament (the semifinals and finals, and maybe the teacher duels, though one never knows how Bliss' injuries will impact those duels.).

Thursday, March 6th, 1997

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

5:15 pm

Ron, Cho, and Michael met by pre-arrangement outside of Dumbledore's office, Ron and Michael walking from Defense class and Cho coming from Magical Healing. While this was not an impromptu visit, the old man was not expecting them.....but did not seem too taken aback at seeing them when he answered the door, though the combination was a little strange. Ron was their spokesman.

"May we have a couple minutes of your time sir?"

"Certainly, please come up." They went up the stairs, and while Ron had been a fairly regular visitor here over the years, this was the first visit for Michael, and only the second for Cho (after Cedric's death), and they were looking around very curiously.

"Well Miss Chang, Mr. Corner, Mr. Weasley, what can I do for you?"

"We have this for you sir." With that, Ron took out a piece of parchment and gave it to the Headmaster. He unrolled it and read the following:

We the undersigned, recognizing the injustice done to Hermione Granger in regards to her leg and her wand, this past Saturday, March 1st, are willing to postpone at her request any tournament duel with her that is drawn on March 8th. This delay would be for a period of twenty-four hours, so that she may have further recovery time for her leg and practice time with her new wand.

Signed:

Ron Weasley

Ginny Weasley

Neville Longbottom

Jack Sloper

Michael Corner

Cho Chang

Luna Lovegood

Lisa Turpin

Padma Patil

Stephen Cornfoot

Terry Boot

Ernie MacMillan

Daphne Greengrass

Blaise Zabini

The only conditions to our offer are that if the opponent is Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Jack Sloper, Stephen Cornfoot, Michael Corner, or Cho Chang, that the match be held as early as possible on

Sunday, so the dueler will have time to recover for the Quidditch game between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, and that she must make the decision to postpone no later than noon on Saturday.

All three could see Dumbledore mentally counting the names at the end, as if sensing that the number was not quite right.

"We assumed that Colin would go along with it, and we did not want Hermione to know until we had all fourteen of us sign it.....and before you ask sir, no one on the list resisted at all."

"May I ask whose idea this was?" Michael took this one:

"It was Luna Lovegood's sir, she broached it to Ron and Neville, and they came to the rest of us." Dumbledore nodded, this was perfect Luna.

"This is very generous of you all, and very gracious. I take it you would like me to communicate this to Miss Granger? I would think she would like it better if it came from you Mr. Weasley, or your sister." Ron looked a bit uncomfortable at this, but barreled on ahead anyway.

"We don't want her to get the wrong idea sir. We're not doing this out of friendship, or what we used to have as friends. We offered this because it is the right thing to do, plain and simple. I would have signed a petition like this for any of the other names on this list just as quickly as I did this one."

"And Mr. Potter's reaction to it?" The old Ron would have been pissed off at hearing this, since Harry wasn't even in the tournament, but the new one recognized that Dumbledore was interested in every psychological detail on Harry that he could get.....plus, Harry was their leader, and the old codger probably assumed that Harry vetted every decision made by his group..

"He didn't have much to say one way or the other sir, only that he thought it was a good idea. I imagine that Luna talked about it with him before she told the rest of us, but I don't know for sure."

"Good enough. Well I will communicate your message to Miss Granger, or have Professor McGonagall do so. Thank you kids, I'll see you at dinner." They all said goodbye and headed back down the stairs, Ron going back to Gryffindor, Michael and Cho to Ravenclaw. Ron was tempted to go back in to find out if Dumbledore would tell him anything about Theo Nott and his being under Imperius, but decided against it (Harry having put Theo under Veritaserum and confirmed that there were no other special instructions, at least for him). No answer was heard that night from Hermione, nor any acknowledgement of their offer one way or the other. The non-answer was to be expected, as she would want all the time she could to evaluate her readiness.....the non-mention of it rankled a few Gryffindors though, and Jack in particular was all for revoking it. That said, everyone knew that Ron and Ginny would be the decision makers behind that, as practically everyone on the list was shocked that they had gone along with it in the first place, and even put their names at the very top.

If one thought about it though, it was not as hard to fathom. Simply put, the Weasley siblings wanted Hermione in the tournament for one reason: They wanted to be the ones to face her, and defeat her. Mind you, both of them felt sorry for Hermione, and certainly weren't cheering her shattered leg (it had needed Skele-Grow after all when the bones weren't knitting as well as Madam Pomfrey would have liked).....but they each had something that they felt they needed to prove. Ron wanted to show that he wasn't just the dumb sidekick in the Trio all those years, standing next to the powerful one and the smart one. Ginny too felt that she was kind of under the older girl's shadow, and in a way kind of resented the friendship forced on her when Hermione came to stay at The Burrow or Grimmauld Place, since they were usually the only two girls.

Hermione, though, stayed away from them that night, as had been her want. She spent most of the evening in the library, and the rest at her favorite place to be with Colin within the Common Room.....near both Dumbledore/McGonagall's Listening Charm.....and one placed by Harry, which was monitored by Dobby. Harry didn't expect anything to come of the charm (he had five placed in various spots in the castle, including Dungeon Seven and two different spots in the library), but he wanted to keep his options open.

So far all he had discovered was that Dungeon Seven was kind of becoming the new Astronomy Tower for those in the Exec Council, there was usually a couple in there every night, and some of the sounds.....goodness.

Friday, March 7th, 1997

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

5:30 pm (again)

Hermione sat down in front of Dumbledore, feeling more than a little uncomfortable. One afternoon a couple of months ago, Bliss had taken her aside and explained the harm she had done to herself by talking with Dumbledore, and how the old man had taken it much for granted. In her heart of hearts she had known this, but still felt compelled to answer his questions (no, he was not using Veritaserum). This talk had been a few days before the murders, and led a little bit to the peace feelers she had put out on the platform (those that had been rejected of course). This was her first visit of this school year here, and she was easily smart enough to have noticed this as well.

"Well Miss Granger, it is nice to see you again. How are you feeling? Is your leg holding up?"

"Yes sir, I'm limping less and less, it should be fine any day now."

"And your new wand? Is it treating you well?"

"That's harder to get used to, but I'm practicing a lot, so it's manageable."

"That's good to hear.....actually the two reasons I brought you in here both have to do with that. I have this to show you first." He slid over the parchment that was the petition given to him yesterday. Hermione's eyes went wide a little as she read it, quickly noting the top two signatures. She did the name count too, and was a little surprised to see her boyfriend's name missing. Dumbledore chuckled a bit, breaking her concentration as she looked up at him.

"I noticed the same thing too Miss Granger, the absence of Mr. Creevey's name. Mr. Weasley explained to me that they took his cooperation as a given, and did not want you to know of this petition until all of them had signed it." Hermione nodded as this made pretty good sense, Colin surely would have told her about it if he had known.

"Ron did this?"

"He presented it to me, along with Miss Chang and Mr. Corner, yesterday in my office. I thought it a splendid gesture, and one wholly unsolicited by me or any member of the faculty. This was their idea completely. Do you have an initial feeling toward their offer?" She thought for a moment, it was kind of tricky. Ideally she would take the deal and the day of further recovery that it offered.....but there was also a trap in it, a sense that she wouldn't be able to live it down if she won her match after an extra day to prepare.

"Thank you sir, but I will be ready tomorrow for my duel, I won't take the postponement, much as I appreciate the offer."

"Very well Miss Granger, I'll inform Mr. Weasley this evening of your answer, I assume he will pass the word along. Now on to the other matter. Mr. Smith has reached a plea bargain with the Ministry of Magic in regards to the charges against him. He will plead guilty to the charges of multiple assault and battery, and serve three months in a Ministry holding cell. He will also have his wand snapped and be expelled from Hogwarts with no appeal. By the terms of his agreement, if he keeps his nose clean for five years, he may apply for a new wand, though he will never be allowed back in Hogwarts or to take NEWTs in Great Britain. Given that he was under Imperius when he attempted to kill you, no charges are being filed against him for that.....but I felt that you have the right to know what the disposition of his case is." The Headmaster had told her the gist of Smith's confession under Veritaserum on Sunday while she was still in the Hospital Wing.

"If he has no wand, can he live in our world? Would he be like Filch then?"

"More or less, yes. He would have the same magical abilities as a squib, unless he obtains a wand on the black market. Wandless magic is possible of course, few sixteen year old wizards are capable of it. I doubt any at Hogwarts could get very far outside of Messrs. Potter, Longbottom, and Zabini. His other option would be to live as a muggle for those five years, which certainly is an option, though not one a pureblood wizard is likely to be overjoyed with."

"Well I suppose I can be satisfied with that punishment. Did he express any remorse for what he did to me?"

"No, I am afraid he did not. I will not tell you exactly what he said.....but there was no remorse."

"Well thank goodness for Harry, Ron, and Neville anyway."

"Yes, they reacted very well. Yesterday in the Hospital Wing, Professor Bliss showed me a pensieve memory of what happened, I was almost taken ill at what I watched."

"Sir, if I may ask.....why weren't you there to watch?"

"Professor McGonagall and I had much to discuss and go over, both for the Quidditch Exhibition and some issues that are cropping for next year." This did not satisfy Hermione really, it was kind of an odd time to have that kind of meeting. It was probably just Order stuff, maybe Bill was meeting with them (in fact they were talking about the transition, and what role Dumbledore would have once he retired). All of the sudden, Hermione began feeling a bit claustrophobic in this office, and wanted nothing more than to leave.....which she did seconds later, as Dumbledore gently dismissed her. She walked back to Gryffindor Tower, wanting to meet up with Colin so that they could go to dinner together. She was almost at the Fat Lady painting when she saw Harry and Colin talking. She stopped and stayed where she was, not wanting to interrupt what she was seeing.

One minute earlier:

Harry, Ron, and Neville stopped Colin and Dennis as they walked out of the Common Room, on their way to the Great Hall for dinner.

"I have a deal for you Colin, if you want it." Both Creeveys looked a bit wary, but listened all the same.

"What kind of deal?"

"If Hermione wins her match tomorrow against anyone but you, I'll let her into the Executive Council without a vote. If she loses, I'll put it to a vote and let you make your case.....unless she loses to you, in which case I'll still do it without a vote." This was not what they had been expecting hear, but it was welcome all the same. Colin was no dummy, and quickly noted that if he lost to Hermione there was no automatic entry, so no laying down.

"What's the catch?"

"Well I'll be doing the same thing with Jack Sloper, only he won't know that we're planning this.....and Hermione is not to know about it ahead of time either, let her fight tomorrow without this as a distraction. This is my gesture for what happened last weekend.....plus I want Sloper in, and she should have her shot." Harry didn't mention the petition, as he kind of thought that maybe Dumbledore hadn't told her about it, that was possibly why she hadn't mentioned it.

"Don't worry Harry, mum's the word." This was the last Creevey word, as Neville cleared his throat.

"Hermione is over there watching us guys, we had better cut this short." This was not to be, as Hermione came up to them.

"Ron, Neville, I just talked to Professor Dumbledore, and he told me of your offer." Colin and Dennis looked a bit perplexed, what offer? She explained:

"The other participants left in the tournament signed a petition allowing me to postpone my match for a day if it would help me recover from last Saturday. I told the Headmaster that I didn't want the delay, but I would like to thank you for thinking of it." Ron and Neville smiled faintly, and Neville responded.

"Well credit should go to Luna, it was her idea.....but we had no trouble signing off on it. You did not deserve what happened to you Saturday, and that was our way of acknowledging that." Hermione smiled back, and the different threesomes went their separate ways to the Great Hall for dinner.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

7:00 pm

Percy shook his head, recovering from the multiple portkey trip (three of them) that he had just survived. Peter Pettigrew had been waiting for him outside his apartment when he arrived home and 'suggested' this little trip. This was Percy's first trip to Death Eater Central, though he had met a few of the experienced troops over the course of his initiation. As the two of them walked through the house, they passed by Draco and Narcissa, both of whom gave Percy friendly greetings, as befitting his new status as a full fledged Death Eater. Draco, who had gone with Percy on the most recent of his squib killings, explained that poor or not (and Percy was not exactly swimming in money, having missed out on the inheritances from his parents and Remus), Percy was a pureblood, and had shown his commitment to the right side. Pettigrew led them into the study, where there were a couple of people waiting for him: Bellatrix and Lord Voldemort.

"Hello there Percy Weasley." Percy was not entirely sure how to respond as Voldemort came forward towards him, so he acted on instinct and went to one knee and bowed his head. Voldemort smiled faintly as he obviously approved of this gesture.

"Up Percy, up. From what I am hearing, you're doing well, very well. Peter in particular is most impressed with you."

"Thank you my Lord, I'm doing what I can to help our cause." Percy decided to treat his new boss just like he did his old one (Fudge), and it seemed to be working.

"I know you are Percy. You have come to us tonight at just the right time. I find myself wanting to take a trip, and I want you to come along with us. How does that sound?"

"I'm always up for a trip my Lord, where are we going?"

"To visit some old friends in Surrey. Bella, do you have the portkey ready?"

"Yes Master, do you wish anyone else to accompany us?" Voldemort pondered this for a few seconds.

"Yes, go get Crabbe and Goyle juniors, we could use some muscle for our amusement." Pettigrew fetched the two goons, who were in the library doing some mandatory reading (Voldemort did not want them to be total morons, and they actually were smarter than they let on). The six of them grabbed hold of the leather belt that was their mode of transportation. They activated it, and Percy took yet another wild trip, winding up in front of a strange house.....one that alone of all the Weasleys, he had never been to: Number 4, Privet Drive, Little Whinging. Voldemort immediately cast some Disillusionment Charms on all of them, but made no move to go inside. Pettigrew did a scan of the house and it's yard, and found no wizards. The spell scan of the house revealed only the wards against Apparition, the charms Dobby had used in Harry's bedroom, and the blood protection spell on the building itself, which were not due to begin failing until August....and even then, only if Harry never returned.

"Bella, go get the squib, Figg, and bring her here. We'll wait a couple of minutes to give you a head start. Crabbe, Goyle, go to the back door and make sure no one leaves, when you hear us inside, come in from that way." She left and walked down the street under her own Disillusionment Charm, the goons went around back to their station. After about three minutes, Voldemort gave the nod to Pettigrew, who walked up to the house and performed the spell Snape had told him about, the one that temporarily rendered the Blood Protection dormant.....for one hour only. Alohomora unlocked the front door and the three of them entered.....greatly surprising Vernon and Petunia, who were watching television in the front living room. Pettigrew hung back in the shadows of the doorway, and neither

Dursley would have been able to recognize them if they had been paying attention.

Without thinking about it, Percy petrified them both before they could open their mouths, earning him a smile from his master (which made him shiver a touch, he silently prayed that Voldemort hadn't noticed it).

"Hello Vernon, Petunia. My name is Lord Voldemort, I expect you have heard quite a bit about me throughout the years, from Harry and from Dumbledore." He was actually sounding pleasant, and this had the same effect on Petunia that it had had on Snape while he was alive: it scared her shitless, and it showed as much in her eyes. They were briefly distracted as Bella brought in Arabella Figg at wand point, with an obvious Silencing Charm attached to her, as she seemed to be screaming something that no one could quite make out (though the Death Eaters were not really trying too hard to do so). Bella deposited her, with a forceful shove, on to the couch next to the Dursleys.

"Well, well, if it isn't Harry's babysitter. Petunia, Vernon, did you know that Arabella here knows all about magic? Judging by way your eyes are bulging, you did not. You see, she was placed here fifteen years ago to keep tabs somewhat on young Harry, and to make sure nothing untoward happened to Dumbledore's little weapon.....oh yes, you must be wondering where the old man is, and why he is not here to rescue you. Well there are alarms going off in his office.....but he happens to be eating dinner right now, so we have at least thirty more minutes to chat and get to know each other." He paused to unfreeze the Dursleys and to put Silencing Charms on the walls.

"Crabbe, Goyle, take a minute of that time to get to know Vernon here." The two young goons proceeded to introduce their fists to his stomach and face, soon making quite a mess of both, with lots of blood. Petunia was screaming her head off, but no one who could help her was able to hear them as they all watched Crabbe and Goyle work. At a snap of Voldemort's fingers they stopped. He continued on his one-sided conversation with the two helpless muggles

"Now I've been very rude haven't I? This is Bellatrix Lestrange, she tortured the parents of one of Harry's friends into insanity. The redhead is Percy Weasley, the only good apple out of a bad bunch, but we like him. No doubt you've met the rest of his family, and he has heard all about you.....which is why I wanted him along. Vernon, your new best friends are Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe, they don't say much, but are very expressive in their actions." Petunia calmed down long enough to ask a question:

"What are you doing here? Why us? We hate that boy more than you ever could!" True, very true.

"That's the problem Petunia.....I don't hate him at all, though I'll admit that we don't know him as well as you.....and you hate him because he is magical, which I don't care for that much. You hate wizards for no other reason than they are wizards.....that's reason enough for me to do what I'm going to do to you. Oh yes, would you like to meet the reason that you had young Harry in the first place? Peter!" Pettigrew ambled in, and produced the biggest shocks yet for Petunia and Vernon.

"Hello Petunia, Vernon.....it's been a long time." Petunia went very stiff in her seat, and a suspicious person might think she was readying for an assault.

"I never really thought Sirius betrayed them, he loved them both too much.....how could you? How could you do that to Lily?"

"They were in the way Petunia, they were the parents of the child of the Prophecy.....and just because I wanted to." Vernon would have loved to reply, but his jaw was broken and he had lost the power of speech. Petunia had no such trouble yet though.

"And now I suppose you're going to kill us? What would that accomplish? Potter wants nothing more to do with us, I doubt we'll ever see him again." At this point, she was no longer hysterical and seemed to have passed into that place where she fully expected to die in the next few minutes. Pettigrew waved his wand in front of her face while he answered.

"Well one good reason to kill you is that it will be another wedge between Dumbledore and your nephew.....I'm sure Harry had every reason to expect you to be under some sort of protection by the old codger.....wrong. Once Snape told us the spell to suspend the Blood Protection.....well it was just a matter of time before our Lord here allowed us to pay this little visit." Voldemort smiled benignly at them, as Bellatrix was using Cruciatus on a still silent Arabella Figg.

"It might interest you to know that Harry has long planned to do something like this himself (if possible, the three prisoners went even more pale). Last year he and I shared a mind at times, if you will, so I was very pleasantly surprised at learning this. It makes me wonder who young Harry will be more angry with: Dumbledore for not protecting you from me, or me for taking the revenge on you that he has long desired? A question to ponder while Percy works on you a little bit." This was Percy's cue to use Cruciatus himself, on Petunia. He seemed to be testing himself on how long he could hold it continuously. Crabbe and Goyle were now beating on Vernon again, and soon the older man was lying limp on the ground, dead.....the two young thugs looked disappointed that Vernon had not had more of a pain threshold. Percy eventually tired of his Crucio spell, and took a few punches at Petunia himself. Eventually though, Pettigrew told them that time was running out (he had not participated in the torture), and that Dumbledore and friends could be there any minute.

"Well Petunia, Figg, it has been wonderful meeting you at last, I'm sorry you have to end this way.....actually, no I'm not." Petunia managed to croak out her last word, as she fought to stay alive, praying for a miracle.....though a healthy Petunia would have scoffed at praying for Dumbledore to show up at any time.

"Dudley."

"Oh you must be wondering what I have planned for your son, well rest assured that he will be joining you very soon. Goodbye Petunia." With his signal, Bella killed Figg (who had not been allowed to say anything, or was even directly addressed until the end), and Peter killed Petunia, waving away Percy from doing it.

"I arranged for her sister to die, it's only right that I should do this." Goyle was looking out the window, and seemed to see something.

"Master, I think someone's coming."

"As nice it would be to see that old idiot again, we don't know what kind of help he can marshal this quickly." He took out the return portkey, and once the other four grabbed on, activated it.

It turned out that Goyle was chasing at shadows a bit, as it was another ten minutes before Dumbledore even returned to his office. When he got inside, he heard the alarm going off on his mantel, an alarm that had only gone off one time in the last fifteen years (in July, when no one was in the office as well, since Dumbledore was at Grimmauld Place). He immediately ran to the floo and contacted Headquarters, and Moody answered.

"The Blood Protections in Surrey have fallen." That was all he needed to say, this was something they had dreaded for years.

"We'll meet you over there Albus, we had better hurry."

Within a minute there were four of them outside Number 4 Privet Drive, using pre-programmed port keys: Dumbledore, Moody, Bill, and Ashley (who was a member of the Order, since she had chosen her lot with Britain when she and Bill had gotten engaged). Nothing appeared to be out of place outside, there was no Dark Mark in the air (nor were there in the various squib killings either). Dumbledore did a scan of the house and found no new spells.....but also found that the Blood Protections were indeed down. They walked up to the door and went inside, only to see the scene in the living room. No one spoke for a moment. Bill walked over and did a cursory check of the bodies, and confirmed that all three were dead. This was something that he had absolutely no experience with, what to do with dead bodies that would be missed if they disappeared.

"What do we do now?"

Moody of course did know all about things like this, in his years as an Auror he had seen pretty much everything.

"Usually we would make it look like a muggle crime scene. It looks like we don't have to do much with Vernon, seems like they just beat him to death. With Arabella and Petunia? Maybe it would be best if we just left things the way they are. No one in their medical examiner's office will be able to guess what happened.....besides, I don't think Potter would appreciate us messing around with his Aunt's body."

That was the unspoken question that Bill and Dumbledore both were asking themselves: What would Harry's reaction be? In that way they were strangely like their enemy Voldemort, who hadn't killed the Dursleys so much for the sheer pleasure of it, as to see what his rival's reaction would be. The sense that he would be outraged was not a done deal as far as Bill was concerned. He knew that Harry had had plans for Vernon in particular, though he felt confident that Harry wouldn't actually have killed his uncle (or the man who married his aunt, as Harry usually referred to Vernon). He decided to end this now, before any muggles happened by.

"Well we had better go tell Harry, he will know the best way to tell Dudley, they are in touch from what he tells me." This raised Dumbledore's eyebrows, but he said nothing about it.

"We should remove any trace of Harry in this house. I fear that the muggle authorities might see him as a suspect, given the rumors his aunt and uncle started about reform school."

"I thought he was ghost registered at the Rowling school, like all the muggleborn students?"

"He is Alastor, but will people believe it?" Bill certainly had an opinion on that.

"There's nothing we can do about it now, though you should have had a talk with these two about those rumors after they started, typical of your carelessness when it came to Harry (Moody smiled when he heard that). And don't worry about Harry's things, he cleaned everything out the night he left here in July. Let's get out of here.....I should mourn these two (pointing at Vernon and

Petunia).....but I can't help but think that they got what was coming to them, for the way they treated Harry." No one said anything to that, since the two other men felt much the same way. Moody went to the telephone and called in a tip to the muggle constabulary, and they readied to leave.

They portkeyed back to Hogwarts, and they made the walk to Gryffindor Tower. As it happened, they were lucky in that Harry was in the corner by the fire, helping Roy Figg and Sarah Owen with a Charms essay that they had due on Monday morning.....given that the trunks were impenetrable to outsiders, and Bill was dreading having to explain how he could enter them so easily. Harry, who because of the trunks spent relatively little time in the main Common Room, looked up in surprise as he saw the somewhat odd foursome coming toward him. Dumbledore addressed them:

"Harry, we need to talk with you for a moment." Roy and Sarah took the hint and gathered their things, moving off after quietly thanking Harry for his help. Bill figured he should be the one to say it, so he jumped in.

"Harry, about an hour ago the wards at Privet Drive were breached.....I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Vernon, Petunia, and Arabella Figg were killed." Harry was silent for a moment, then asked the first question that came to his mind.

"Voldemort?"

"We don't know for sure, but the Blood Protections were down, so it wasn't muggles." Harry sat back and closed his eyes, saying a silent prayer. He opened his eyes then and looked hard at Dumbledore.

"I suppose they used the same spell that Snape used when he dropped by?"

"Yes I would imagine they did Harry, though I'm not entirely sure how, since I removed it from Severus' memory soon after he was freed from Ministry control. He must have sent something to Voldemort before I had a chance to do it. I'm sorry Harry, I'm sorry more than I can say." If Voldemort had hoped for Harry trying to kill Dumbledore

he was going to be sorely disappointed, as Harry had kind of suspected that this was coming, and couldn't really hold it against his former mentor.....and this was, for all intents and purposes, not new business, part of a grievance (Snape) already settled.

“What about Dudley?”

“We don’t know, we thought you would best know how to tell him. We called the muggle authorities on our way out, they should be there any minute now.”

“Bill, please go tell him.....and tell him he’s in a lot of danger, they’ll want him next I would imagine. I’m sure they can find a way to get into Smeltings.” This was to be expected really, some arrangements should be made for Dudley, if he wanted to avail himself of them. Moody broke in:

“You’ve been expecting this haven’t you?” Harry sighed and almost started laughing, trust Moody to have figured this out.

“I’m not surprised, if that’s what you’re asking. Either Voldemort was trying to kill off the Blood Protection Spell for good, or he was hoping I would blame Dumbledore here for it and try to kill him or something. Well he fails on both counts: I was never going to see those two again anyway, and I’m not about to give him the satisfaction of me starting a civil war on our side by attacking you Headmaster. Bill, will you offer Dudley sanctuary at The Burrow if he wants it? I’ll offer the same at Godric’s Hollow.....keep your opinion on that last one to yourself Professor Dumbledore, the house and land are back under Fidelius.” Dumbledore had opened his mouth to object to Godric’s Hollow, as he was not aware of the spell being placed back on it.

“Yes he can stay at The Burrow if he wants, Ashley and I will go up there right now. It’s outside London right?” Harry took out another of his pre-programmed portkeys and gave it to Bill. Moody was smiling as he glimpsed the armada of getaways that Harry had on his person (he was currently carrying six other portkeys on his person). Dumbledore broached a thorny subject before the two younger ones zipped away.

"Harry, will you be wanting to attend the funerals? Arabella did not have any close family, so hers would be a wizard funeral, but your aunt and uncle....." He dearly did not want Harry to go to them, as they would be a security nightmare, but he knew that as soon as he suggested not going, Harry would insist on making the trip and staying a long time.....Dumbledore was not totally stupid when it came to dealing with teenagers.

"I don't think I should, Voldemort and his toadies might be hoping for something like this, to draw me out into the open without much backup. Plus.....while I know it might help Dudley to have me there, I just can't mourn for those people, people who hated my guts from the moment I was born to the moment they died.....I'm a lot of things, a hypocrite is not one of them." A pleasant surprise hearing that, or so thought both the Headmaster and Moody, while Bill and Ashley look a bit relieved that potential conflict was resolved so easily. They popped away, and the other two went down to Dumbledore's office to talk over some other matters. Harry sat back in his chair and contemplated life for a little while, before he waved Roy and Sarah back over, telling them only that there had been a death in his family.

8:00 pm

Bill and Ashley appeared right outside the main residence hall of Smeltings Academy, a somewhat posh private school that had housed Dudley for the last six years. The students were all in one building, and there was no security guard or anything in the main lobby, just a resident advisor (RA) on duty. He looked up perplexed as he saw the two wizards enter the lobby (they had stopped momentarily outside to transfigure their clothes into muggle type wear).

"Can I help you?" Given that it was a guy, Ashley (who was very pretty, as if Bill would land any other kind) used some charm on him.

"Yes, we'd like to see your Headmaster please, its kind of an emergency." Both were smiling, and the RA did as asked. The Headmaster lived on the ground floor with his wife, and was only a few seconds walk away. He walked into the lobby and approached them.

"Hello, my name is David Morrell and I am the Headmaster here, what can I do for you?"

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Morrell, I'm Bill Weasley and this is my fiancé Ashley Reynolds, we are family friends of one of your students, Dudley Dursley, and there has been some trouble at his home.....may we talk with you in your office?"

"Certainly, John, please go get Dudley and bring him to my quarters. My office is in the class building, but my quarters are right over here, my wife and kids are off visiting her parents this weekend." They walked into his rooms and they all sat down.

"So how has Dudley been doing in school this year? His letters don't mention much of his classes."

"He's doing pretty well, continuing his improvement of last year.....and his behavior is eons better than in his first four years."

"Well he had a near death experience a couple of summers ago, it matured him I think." They continued to make small talk about Dudley until the boy himself knocked on the door and was admitted. He started a bit, seeing his two visitors (he had never met Ashley), but recovered. Dudley had lost another ten kilos since Bill had seen him last, and was looking pretty good.....until now.

"Hi Bill, what's going on? Is Harry ok?"

"He's fine Dudley.....Harry is Dudley's cousin, my brother is his best friend and he's like a brother to me too, that's how I came to meet Dudley here (all said for Morrell's benefit).....Dudley, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your mother and father were killed about an hour ago." Dudley started shaking, and was soon crying.....a marked contrast to Harry's reaction, which was one more of 'ho-hum'. All three went over to comfort him, as he let his grief out.

"How did it happen? Was it...." Bill didn't dare let him finish that question, and quickly interrupted.

"Yes, it was that person that we all feared. You see Mr. Morrell, Dudley's father's company, Grunnings Drills, was being shadowed kind of by this underworld crime boss, and Vernon was trying to hold him off from taking the company over, the guy was trying to strong-arm him, but he was resisting.....I never thought that it would come to this though." For making this up as he went along, Bill thought the story was pretty convincing, and grieving though he was, Dudley wasn't giving away either that the story was only a vague shadow of the truth.

"I was in the area, so I was asked to come here, so that it would be a friend who broke the news.....and I'll be honest Dudley, you might be in some danger yourself, even here." The two muggles went a little pale at hearing that, this was something that even Dudley hadn't been expecting to hear.

"Mr. Morrell, could Ashley and I have a moment alone with Dudley, there are a couple of things we need to deal with."

"Certainly, I should go on rounds for a bit anyway. Please help yourselves to something to drink." He left the room, and after Bill introduced Ashley, things got serious right away.

"Yes Dudley, it was Voldemort, or his people anyway, we can't be sure. Harry thinks that you're in danger here, and I have to say I agree."

"Why would he kill them? Why would he want to kill me?"

"You have to understand that all we have are theories.....one theory is the Blood Protection, but he's found a way around that anyway.....the other is that he's trying to hurt Harry, a lot of people around him have died in the last year."

"I know, he wrote me about your mum and dad, I'm sorry."

"Thank you.....I guess I'm one of the few people who knows how you feel Dudley. Now we have two options here as I see it, though feel free to spit out any ideas that you have.....one, we can put you into hiding until the war is over and Voldemort is gone, and I think the

final battle will happen before summer.....or you can ride it out here and hope that the Death Eaters aren't brazen enough to walk into a school full of muggle kids and kill someone.....and I personally don't think they are Dudley, but it's not my life being wagered on it. If you choose the hiding option, you can live with us at our home in Ottery St. Catchpole....." Left unsaid was that Bill's life was wagered every second of every day, as he knew that he was likely number three on the Death Eater's most wanted list, after Harry and Dumbledore.

"That Burrow place that Harry kept talking about for years?"

"Yeah, Ashley and I live there now, we're to be married in three weeks as well, we can arrange for you to come then too if you want.....or you can go to Godric's Hollow in Wales, where Harry's mum and dad lived after they married. Both locations are totally secure and no one will find you at either place. If the war takes a turn for the worse, we can make plans for you to continue your schooling in America, or perhaps Australia. I know it's a tough choice Dudley, and unfortunately you're not going to have much time with which to make it. They could be outside right now for all we know.....well let's find out." Bill took his wand out and did a scan (which can cover a radius of up to 100 meters if done by a powerful wizard, as Bill is).

"Well there aren't any magical folk in the building or right outside at any rate.....a bit surprising that there aren't any closet wizards among your schoolmates though, usually there are a few muggleborns each year who refuse to acknowledge the Hogwarts letter, or their parents do."

"I think I'll stay here for now Bill, I don't think they'll come in here.....and I don't want to give up being able to live my everyday life."

"I understand Dudley, I can't say I blame you really. Just be careful when you're outside school Ok?"

"I will, I usually am with a bunch of friends when we get our London trips."

"Good to hear, that will help. Tell me, how odd would it look if you were to own a pet owl? Would it even be allowed here?"

"We can have birds as pets if we want, yeah, as long as they're not too loud. I take it you want me to have it for emergencies or something?" Bill reflected that this was not the moron that Harry had been talking about for years, maybe all bullies should be introduced to Dementors.

"I think it would be wise yes. I'll have Fred and George come by next week with one, they do most of our muggle stuff."

"Cool, ask them to bring some pranks with them, I have some money that I've been meaning to send to Harry to buy them. He's not coming to the funeral is he?"

"You don't want him to?"

"Well leaving aside that Aunt Marge will throw a fit if he does.....well if something happens to him, my parents will have died for nothing." Bill just smiled and shook his head, who knew. He and Ashley soon took their leave, after promising that they would have some undercover people watching the funeral, just to be safe.

Harry told his friends that night, and they agreed with him that it was hard to grieve for those people. It was not made common knowledge though, and stayed within the trunk circle.

The funeral for Vernon and Petunia Dursley took place the following Monday, and occurred without incident. The only family who attended were Dudley, Vernon's sister Marge, and a few of his cousins from West Cornwall, where Vernon hailed from originally. Petunia Evans Dursley had no family left, other than Harry, they had all died or been killed. Harry kept to his vow of not attending, though he sent a long letter to Dudley. Bill sent Tonks to the funeral as his 'observer', but during a series of magical scans, she found no magical presence other than herself. Voldemort sent no letter or message to Harry or the Order gloating about the deaths, and relations between the Boy Who Lived and his no-longer-beloved Headmaster continued on as they had.

Saturday, March 8th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

1:00 pm

The Great Hall was totally packed, as by unofficial count, only three students were not in attendance to watch the eight matches of the Sweet Sixteen. Through the doors right at 1:00 pm walked Professor Bliss, the first anyone had seen of her since she left the Hospital Wing the afternoon before. She got a very loud roar of applause and cheering as the students noticed her.....and even most of the few remaining pro-Dark Slytherins were clapping as well. She walked over to Shepherd and Flitwick and seemed to be enjoying the applause. She finally raised her hands to stop it, and put Sonorus on her voice.

"Thanks guys, I appreciated the good feeling. I would like to thank my friend Charles Shepherd here, and Gryffindor fourth years Gary Fleder and Scott Rosenberg, all three of whom saved my life last week (more applause). I would also like to acknowledge instances of compassion and resilience. Compassion by fifteen competitors left in the tournament, who, unsolicited, offered Miss Granger an extra day to recover after what happened last week.....and resilience, from Miss Granger when she politely declined. This is what sportsmanship is all about, it's not just found on the Quidditch Pitch."

"Now, on to business. We have eight matches to do today, and the format will be somewhat different than in the past few weeks. All eight of our seeds are in this round, which makes Professor Flitwick and I and our seeding abilities feel pretty good I don't mind telling you, and since they cannot face each other until next week, they must each face one of the eight unseeded competitors. So there will be two bowls, one with seeds, one without (some snickering in the crowd as someone conjured a bunch of grapes and tossed it into the dueling area, Bliss caught it and started munching on them to a lot of laughter). I will draw a name from each bowl, and those will be the match-ups. Are the sixteen competitors ready?" They all nodded, and she reached into the first bowl.

“Neville Longbottom.”

“Ernie MacMillan.”

This was not the match-up that people wanted, as Ernie was considered one of the weakest duelers remaining, but Neville wasn't taking anyone lightly. The two of them took their places and Shepherd gave the signal to begin.....and everyone wondered what Neville would do first, as he had proven to be the most unorthodox of the main duelers.....and the coldest, if people were to be honest. Neville and Ernie were friends of a sort, but Ernie was not part of the trunk circle, and Neville felt free to experiment on him.

He started off with a series of Tripping Jinxes, doing them in a wide-ish sweep that managed to catch Ernie with one as he dodged. Ernie had decided to play a defensive match in the beginning and try to see what kind of strategy Neville would use.....a strategy that would prove to be something of a disaster in retrospect. Once Ernie hit the ground Neville tried to end the match quickly with a Stupefy, but it barely grazed Ernie's shoe as he scrambled to hit feet.....but now he was limping, as the spell must have done something to his foot, twisted or sprained it. This would prove to be key, as practically Ernie's only advantage had been his quickness. Neville was like a vulture now as he closed in, and again started using Tripping Jinxes and continually sent Ernie to the ground, though the follow up Stupefy did not get a direct hit the first few times. Ernie did get some spells off, but they were usually not well aimed, since he was either on the ground, or trying not to go back on the ground.....so Neville did not have to do a lot of defense, which he appreciated, even though defense was his strong suit. After what seemed like an eternity to Ernie, and all of the Hufflepuffs stridently rooting for their only tournament representative (but in reality was only five minutes), Neville managed to nail him in the back with a Stupefy, and the match was over. After Ernie was woken up, the two shook hands and moved off the floor. Bliss congratulated them both, and moved on to the next names:

“Blaise Zabini.”

“Daphne Greengrass.”

There were howls of laughter all over the Great Hall, as the first couple match-up of the tournament was announced. The pro-Darks were especially gleeful, as they were hoping for mass carnage as Blaise and Daphne took their places.....though not before they hugged each other. The trunk group was split in their rooting, as Ron and the others still alive in the tournament were rooting for Daphne, who they thought would be less of a challenge in the next rounds, while Harry was rooting for Blaise, though all he really wanted was for no one to get hurt.

Blaise and Daphne, who already had their wedding day privately picked out, had discussed this possibility..... and while they didn't fix the match or anything, they had no intention of even halfway seriously harming the other. They circled each other cautiously in a manner that reminded the crowd of the way Blaise had taken out Katie in the last round. They tried some new spells, such as a Confusion Charm that left Daphne disoriented for a moment, and a Spinning Jinx that turned Blaise right around. Neither time though, did the other move in for the kill. In past matches the crowd would start booing now, and some of the students did.....and to a person they were all students who didn't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and could understand the dilemma. The match lasted fifteen minutes, and only ended when Daphne just ran out of energy, as Blaise the runner could go for double that time if he had to. Daphne got a bit careless and started using a pattern to her dodging, and Blaise was savvy enough to spot it.....and one last time she dodged left on cue, and he nailed her with a seven meter Petrificus Totalus. He stood over her and motioned for Bliss to come over. Using eye blinks, Daphne and Bliss communicated to each other Daphne's surrender, as Blaise refused to stun his girlfriend. This was the first surrender of the tournament, and no one in the crowd felt cheated. Once unfrozen, the two hugged and kissed, and walked off arm in arm to the cheers of the crowd.

“Terry Boot.”

“Stephen Cornfoot.”

A duel between two roommates, though not especially close friends. Their relationship was more akin to that of Harry and Seamus.....friendship and respect to be sure, but they weren't visitors to each other's houses during the holidays. Terry was not really that close to anyone in his dorm room, whereas Stephen was very tight with Michael Corner, and was dating his fellow sixth year Su Li. They shook hands at the beginning, and squared off.

This was another slugfest in sense, as both did not use shields and spent relatively little time dodging. It didn't last long either, as these were two physically strong guys (not all the good athletes played Quidditch, as both Blaise and Terry proved) wailed on each other from close range. At one point, Terry actually had Stephen's wand in his hand, only to have his opponent charge him and take it right back.....with no punch thrown either. They were expending a ton of energy firing spells and when they weren't firing, they were reversing the spells that hit them. The duel had the crowd really into it, in a way that the first two matches had not, as few were cheering one person in particular, but were rooting for as long a match as possible. Eventually though, Terry got the upper hand and ended the match with a Stupefy, after six very wild minutes. They shook hands again afterward, and both of them walked off twitching and shaking from the residual effects of the spells that had connected. The seeds were now 3-0 for the round.

"Cho Chang."

"Michael Corner."

More laughter greeted this, as the last possible couple combination was drawn (Hermione and Colin, being non-seeds, could not duel each other until the next round). Cho and Michael, despite being a couple for over nine months, were not considered the most stable of matches, and this duel was not likely to help things. It was much talked about that Cho's previous boyfriends had been the two stars of the school (everyone in Hogwarts considered Cho and Harry to be a former couple, though in reality it had just been one kiss and one date), and Michael, while a great student and a good athlete, was not on that level. Their relationship was considered to be doomed once Cho left Hogwarts and her eye would be free to wander. Everyone

assumed Michael would lay down for his girlfriend so that she could win.....but they were to be very disappointed.

Michael went on the offensive immediately, using his superior strength and power to take command right from jump, and he never really let it go. Cho seemed shocked that he would unload on her like that, and the look on her face had Harry in particular in stitches. It was clear to the entire crowd that she had been overconfident, and the intensity that Michael was showing was not helping things for her. He was fighting like he wanted to win really badly, and within three minutes had Cho boxed in, in the northwest corner of the dueling area. Michael had watched Neville pretty closely during the tournament, with an eye toward meshing his own strengths with Neville's (a powerful wizard who was not physically strong or fast). He began using the Tripping Jinx at full bore, and soon Cho could not get up off the ground before he tripped her back down. He finished her off in short order, and the crowd was ecstatic. The girls in the crowd were mostly against Cho because of her sometimes snotty attitude, and how beautiful she was.....the boys, who all would have shagged her in a heartbeat, delighted in her being taken down a peg, and by her own boyfriend no less. The two did not walk off hand in hand, and no one was the least bit surprised to hear the next morning that they had a major fight in the Ravenclaw Common Room (very public) and broke up that night. Cho was heard to be yelling "you should have let me win". Rumors immediately started on who she would pursue next, and the smart money was on Harry or Ron, no matter how solid their own relationships were.

"Lisa Turpin."

"Jack Sloper."

This was unofficially the closest match seed wise in the round, as the dueler considered to be the least of the seeds, Sloper, was against the most dangerous non-seed, Turpin. The match was another long one, as Lisa exposed Jack's biggest weakness: a lack of a coherent strategy. She was not in control the entire time, as Sloper's power had her on the run at times, and even on the floor twice.....but at all times did Lisa have her strategy in mind. She played on Sloper's impatience, and on his relative inexperience in dealing with good

duelers. The seventh year was not, as Pettigrew noted in an earlier chapter, noted for its great Defense students, indeed there were more fifth year students in this round than seventh years. On the other hand, Lisa practiced with elite student duelers during every Defense class. Eventually Sloper got tired of fencing with her, and moved closer and closer, which she encouraged by not retreating as he thought she might. Without warning though, Lisa used a flash spell that left him disoriented for a second, and by the time that second was over he was tightly bound in magical ropes, and a stunning spell followed after that. Another seed had gone down, but few in the crowd really felt that it was an upset.

“Luna Lovegood.”

“Padma Patil.”

A third and last Ravenclaw only match, and it was done almost before anyone realized it, as Luna immediately nailed Padma with a Confusion Charm and like lightning hit her with a Stupefy immediately afterward. It was the second quickest duel of the tournament, after Sloper’s one shot in the first round. The crowd was in awe at Luna’s speed, which heretofore she had not demonstrated. The hidden secret for her was that Harry was working with her more than any of his other friends, and he was so fast that her reaction times had to be phenomenal just to get a spell to graze him. She walked over to Padma, woke her up, and lifted her off the ground in a hug. After a few questions along the lines of ‘what the hell just happened to me?’, Padma hugged her back and they hopped over the wall to watch the two main events.

The main events were fittingly last, and were known as soon as Luna and Padma were announced: The Weasleys versus Hermione and Colin, only the order was to be determined. Ron and Ginny were huddled with Harry, getting last second tips and pointers.....though they had both prepared for Hermione in their own strategy and practice sessions with each other during the week. Ron and Ginny may have fought a lot, as brother and sister are wont to do, and they loved Luna and Neville like family.....but they wanted one of them to win this tournament in the worst way, and the other to

either finish second or to lose to the other if luck wouldn't let them face in the final.

"Ginny Weasley." The crowd waited with baited breath as Bliss smilingly drew out the suspense, she knew what these two matches meant.

"Colin Creevey."

Ooohs and ahhhs filled the room, as Ginny faced her second Creevey in as many rounds. Colin had a very determined look on his face as he took his place. Ginny decided to play some psychological warfare and just yawned at him, buffing her nails on her robes as she moved into position (she learned this from Snape, who did the same after Remus threatened him on Comeuppance Night). Bliss told them to begin and Colin braced himself for the onslaught.....only to be caught off guard when Ginny only threw a Tickling Charm at him, and moved back, firing off minor jinxes as she went from ten meters away to twelve. Colin just stood there at first, and was soon doubled over laughing at two of the ticklers hit him one after the other, him being surprised enough by the tame onslaught to be caught off guard. Ginny watchers were confounded when she did nothing but fire more ticklers at him, and soon Colin was lying on the ground.....but she did nothing but stand there and watch. Eventually he righted himself and stood up to begin again.....only to be right back down on the ground as she shot a Percussion Hex that hit him full in the face, drawing blood from his mouth and nose.....but still she did not move in for the kill. Colin got to his feet again like a drunken prize fighter as Ginny just eyed him, with a blank expression on her face and finally began inching forward. He raised his wand to attack and she quickly summoned it to her hand, as he did not have the firmest grip he could have on it.

Ginny turned to look at Hermione as she twirled Colin's wand in her hand. Their eyes met for a brief second before Hermione ripped hers away to look at Colin, who was waiting with his palms in the air as if to say 'what are you waiting for?'. Ginny moved forward a little bit and aimed both wands at him, firing another tickler, just to see what would happen. The impact of both almost flipped him over, as he landed on his back with a thud, and all of the air went out of him. The crowd was

giggling a bit, as Ginny toyed with her fellow fifth year. She waited for a sec to see if he got up, but he laid there on the ground twitching from the tickler that he could not reverse. Ginny then put her own wand in her pocket and stunned him with his wand, ending the match. Two Creeveys.....and no spell hit her in either match, nor was any even fired at her. She woke Colin up with his wand, and dropped said wand on his chest as she left the dueling area. There were many, many wagers going on during the tournament, and those who bet on Ginny to win it all were looking very pleased with themselves. As she passed him by, Ginny and Harry shared a smirk at her total destruction of the Creevey family, and no remotely Dark magic had been used.

The next introductions were foregone, but Bliss did them anyway.

“Ron Weasley.”

“Hermione Granger.”

The crowd roared for Ron and did not let up as Hermione went over the wall and into the dueling area. As he passed by his sister, Ron heard two words:

“No mercy.” He looked at Ginny, and nodded grimly. He took his place opposite his former friend and readied himself for what was to come. While Ron certainly cared about the rest of the tournament, he knew this if he won this match and lost the next one, he could still feel satisfied with himself. Bliss gave them their signal, and the show was on. The match was a very strange one, and while it did not satisfy certain peoples’ taste for blood, it did show quite a bit.

Ron first fired a Bat Bogey hex at Hermione, surprising her to say the least, as this was Ginny’s trademark hex, and the redhead herself shouted out to Hermione:

“You didn’t think that Charlie just showed that hex to me did you Hermione!” Whether Hermione heard that sally was not immediately clear, as she was too busy fighting off bats, and once she did.....where was Ron? She looked frantically around for her former friend but couldn’t see him, he was under a Disillusionment Charm.

Now it was common knowledge that when under a Disillusionment Charm one could not fire any spells, so Hermione was not worried about being hit with anything right away.....but all she could really do was fire spells here and there, hoping to get lucky.....which she did not, as nothing seemed to happen. It did not occur to her that the best possible defense against such a charm was to do the same thing, but then again, she did not have the benefit of dozens of practice duels against Harry, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, with a few against the other trunk circle thrown in for good measure.

If she had had a magical eye like Moody's, she would have seen Ron inching slowly up on her, taking advantage of her own movements to close the gap on her, about four meters a minute at the current pace. He fully was expecting her to hit him with something by now, Harry usually used a water spraying charm when Ron tried this trick (which pleased Winky to no end, since it gave her something to clean up). Hermione didn't do this though, and to his amazement, Ron got within half a meter of her before she finally got clever and shot a stream of confetti out of her wand, which covered the entire area in paper. Some of the paper rested on thin air, and Hermione now knew where Ron was: right in front of her. Ron's reflexes took over and he grabbed the tip of her wand right out of her hand, and the crowd braced for another snapping, and Dumbledore would have reflexively patted his wallet if he carried such a thing (he had paid for Hermione's new wand). Not to be though, as Ron quickly backed away and threw the wand in the air.....helping that with a powerful Banishment Charm that sent the wand deep into the crowd. The students around the wand didn't know what to do as Bliss shouted at the crowd:

"Stay where you are, no one touches that wand or interferes with the match!"

They did as ordered, and Hermione turned to face Ron, who, exhausted from holding the Disillusionment Spell on himself for so long (his longest in practice had been one minute), stood there panting, his wand halfway raised.

"Well Ron, let's get it over with, stun me." That was the wrong thing to say to Ron, as he was about to do just that.....but by Merlin he was long done taking orders from Hermione.

"I don't think so darling, I prefer a surrender."

"You wish."

"I'll draw this out as long as necessary Hermione, there's no Quidditch game or Hogsmeade visit to hurry it along for."

"You would, like your sister did. You both are so alike."

"Thank you Hermione, I take that as a high compliment. Just admit that you're beaten and we can get along with our afternoons, I'm sure you have some studying to do." It had not gone unnoticed by Hermione that Ron's grades, and general classroom knowledge had gone way up without her, so that line of retort wouldn't do her much good. The entire Great Hall was silent as they listened to this. Most of them had heard the two of the bicker before.....but this was so personal , and so bitter.

"I didn't surrender when my leg was in ten pieces, what makes you think I'll do so now?" Ron grinned in his goofy way when he heard that. He looked over at Harry, who's grin was equal to it.

"Now that's the Hermione I used to like. Stupefy!" She went down in a heap, and Ron walked off the floor, another Weasley who had not had a spell hit him on the day. Natalie McDonald happened to be standing next to Hermione's wand, and brought it over to her after she was woken up. As Ron got to Harry, the two embraced in a hug, Harry whispering to him.

"You did it mate, you exorcised a lot of demons, for the both of us." For the both of them, because Harry would never get to duel Hermione.....Bliss was very careful with whom she paired Hermione up in Defense class. The rest of Ron's group crowded around him after that, congratulating him on a dominating performance, while Hermione was comforted by Colin and Dennis.

So the field was now down to the Elite Eight: Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Blaise Zabini, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Michael Corner, Lisa Turpin, and Terry Boot (like the other lists, these names are in random order and nothing should be read into it). Ravenclaw was ecstatic at their representation still left, and even the pro-Darks in Slytherin made a point of congratulating Blaise for upholding the House honor (well Pansy and Millicent didn't, but the seventh years did).

Sunday, March 9th, 1997

2:00 pm

Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch

"Welcome everyone to the fourth Quidditch match of the season, Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor!" Colin, who while still smarting from his loss the day before to Ginny, introduced the team members of both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor as they flew into the stadium (Sloper indeed was playing in place of Michael Leach, the only lineup change for either team from the November matches). Cho and Katie shook hands, as the balls were released. The crowd was split right down the middle, as Hufflepuff was rooting for Ravenclaw, since a Ravenclaw victory would still give them a chance at a three-way tie (at 2-1), which they could win on overall points due to their wipeout of Slytherin. Slytherin was by and large rooting for Gryffindor, because of Harry more than anything.

The quaffle was controlled initially by Gryffindor, as Natalie and Katie played keep away from their counterparts as they advanced on Cornfoot and the Ravenclaw goals. They were using this time to just get warmed up.....but not before Orla Quirke of Ravenclaw stole the quaffle and tore off toward Ron.....who made a nice save on her subsequent shot. The first few rushes went much the same way on both sides, with Ron and Stephen making solid saves on some decent shot attempts, allowing one goal each through ten minutes. Higher in the air, Cho was up to her usual tricks of shadowing Harry and following his movements. One gesture from her did get a raised eyebrow from Harry.

"Hey Harry! Let me get the Snitch and I'll give you another kiss, a real one this time!" Harry started laughing, and made sure that she saw him laughing.

"No kiss is worth the Snitch Cho.....You'd have a better chance offering that to Megan in your next match!" This is not to say that Megan Jones swung that way, but that Harry wanted no part of kissing her himself. Cho mock pouted for a second, and then blew him a kiss as he rocketed off toward Ron so that he could end the conversation.

While they were talking, Katie scored two quick goals and Gryffindor was now in the lead, 30-10. The Snitch had not made an appearance.....yet was going to be the next word, but the Snitch was now hovering near the bottom left goal near Ron. Harry put his right eye on Cho as she seemed not to see it, and he pivoted slightly toward the Snitch and rocketed off toward it, just as Ginny was scoring her first goal of the day. Before Cho even realized what was happening, Harry was inches from the Snitch, a ball that had now decided to start playing and began bobbing and weaving. Harry risked a quick look back and saw that Cho was now moving in this direction, so he did something that seemed incredibly stupid at the time.....he got a good plant and leaped off his broom, grabbing the Snitch on his way down, falling about ten meters. Once done he whipped out his wand and Accio'd his broom back to him, somehow regaining control of it a mere two meters from the ground. He hopped off it again and landed safely on the dirt as he held the Snitch high over his head. It was his first Snitch grab in over a year, and felt very good.

The rest of the team got to the ground and immediately raised Harry onto their shoulders, thanking him gleefully for their very light workout, a mere fifteen minutes. The final score was 200-20 for Gryffindor, and the overall standing were thus:

Gryffindor: 2-0, 420 points

Hufflepuff: 1-1, 660 points

Ravenclaw: 1-1, 330 points

Slytherin: 0-2, 50 points

The Quidditch Cup was still not clinched though, as Gryffindor would need to go through the formality of defeating Slytherin at the end of April, due to Hufflepuff's large lead in the overall points. The next two matches were to be Hufflepuff versus Ravenclaw on April 19th, and Slytherin versus Gryffindor on April 26th. Both matches were earlier than they would have been so that the school team for the exhibition could be chosen and the team have a chance to practice. The spots still all seemed to be up for grabs, with Slytherin expected to have no players chosen, and Cho was seemingly out of contention to be Seeker, even if Harry was selected to play Chaser, and everyone knew he would be playing some position in the game. John Terry found Harry after the game for a quick word, not bothering to take him aside from his teammates.

"Very impressive Harry, I imagine you've wanted to do that move for quite a while now." Harry laughed, it was true though.

"Yes I have, though in past years I wouldn't have been so confident with my Accio to do it. It was a rush though man, now I know why muggles jump out of airplanes." The older man surprised them all with his reply.

"Jumping out of an airplane is a rush too, I tried it once just to see.....though I had my wand with me just in case. All of you played very well today, five goals to two for the Chasers, excellent. Ron, you were extremely solid, it's been a pleasure to watch you get better with every match you play." Ron fairly glowed with such praise, while Harry had not formally introduced John, everyone who played Quidditch knew who he was and that a compliment from him was gold. He soon excused himself and the team went to Gryffindor Tower to celebrate.

In Executive Council that night, Jack Sloper was approved unanimously by the group to be their next member, and in a surprise suggestion, Natalie McDonald was as well. She was proposed by Katie Bell, who said that her tournament performance, class standing (third in her year) and her overall toughness should be enough to

make her one of them. She was voted in with only four dissents (the Creeveys, Ernie, and Su Li). Both Jack and Natalie, after having been sent for, enthusiastically agreed to join, and sat in for the next debate.

Hermione's vote was much tougher, and Colin and Dennis took a lot of flack for their continued insistence on trying to get her in, even though they correctly pointed out that this time was Harry's idea. Harry produced a new parchment that Bill had created, one that forbid Hermione from even writing down the words Executive Council or anything like it, unless she was in Dungeon Seven (which had been charmed so that the parchment's secrecy rules did not apply inside its walls). When asked if this meant that he was endorsing her addition to the council, Harry only said that he was just being prepared for the will of his friends and what they decided. After another fifteen minutes of abuse heaped on Hermione, Colin, and Dennis, the group voted 27-14 against letting her in. Harry alone did not vote, and it was telling that of the Gryffindor contingent, only the Creeveys voted for her.....though Ron and Ginny stayed silent during the debate as well, letting Blaise and Cho, neither of whom liked Hermione one bit, handle their end of the argument.....the Weasleys felt that they had made their points sufficiently on Saturday.

The week was another one filled with no truly momentous events for any of our players. On Monday it was announced that four third and fourth year Slytherins had decided to take Professor Shepherd up on his offer to get them into Durmstrang immediately. This left the pro-Darks at twelve students: Seven students from seventh year (two boys and all five girls), two from sixth year (Pansy and Millicent had been ordered to stay in a secret communication from Draco), and three fifth year boys, who were unwilling to abandon things so close to their OWLs, however much they might have wanted to leave Hogwarts and its increasing hostility toward them.

Wednesday marked Ron's seventeenth birthday, and Harry threw him, Lisa, and Daphne (whose birthdays were two days earlier and one day later respectively) a huge party in Dungeon Seven, inviting all of the council as well as all the Weasleys and future Weasleys (of course not Percy). The Weird Sisters came in via portkey at Harry's personal request, and performed a set that would have everyone in

the room talking about it for years to come. The only payment they demanded were some autographs from him for their parents and siblings, which Harry was happy to provide, given the looks on his three friends faces.....and the simultaneous big kisses on the cheek that he got from Lisa and Daphne.....Ron asked if it was ok that he skipped that part, somehow Harry recovered from that particular disappointment. Ron started his Apparition lessons the next night, and Bill promised him that he would be ready by the time the wedding happened.

On Thursday the Slytherin Four, Sean Touchet, Neil MacCauley, and the Miller brothers, Trevor and Matthew, were found guilty on charges of assault and attempted murder. They were all put under Veritaserum and confessed the whole enterprise. Madam Bones did some further fishing, but found no other acts of violence.....but did find that Touchet was in occasional communication with Voldemort, though he did not have a Dark Mark. Because he was the ringleader, he was sentenced to thirty years in Azkaban, while Matthew Miller and Neil MacCauley got twenty years. Due to his age, fourteen year old Trevor was given a much lighter sentence of one year in a Ministry holding cell. All of them were of course expelled from Hogwarts and their wands snapped forever, with no chance of applying for a new one, even Trevor. After his year was up he was to live as a squib or a muggle for the rest of his life. When all of this was announced at dinner, the Pro-Darks sat with impassive faces as the other Slytherins mocked them with fake sympathetic smiles.

Saturday, March 15th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

2:00 pm

Without a ton of preamble, Professor Bliss took to the floor and announced the first pairing to the packed house. Harry braced himself for the unpleasantness that he knew was bound to occur very soon.

“Luna Lovegood.”

“Terry Boot.”

Some of the younger Ravenclaws looked disappointed, as they were not so secretly hoping for an all Ravenclaw Final Four, which had been possible with four Ravenclaw quarterfinalists. Harry brightened up considerably.....while he liked Terry a lot and considered him a good friend.....there was no way Terry could be offended at his openly cheering for Luna. The crowd didn't seem to be cheering for one person in particular, as both of the Ravenclaws were kind of loners in their own House. They took their places and waited for Bliss to tell them to begin, Terry watching Luna very carefully.....and if truth be told, a bit nervously, after what she did to Padma a week ago.

When the signal to begin fell, both Terry and Luna quickly moved forward and to their respective rights, the same move exactly, which gave them both pause enough to look at each other and start laughing. Terry called out to her:

"Shall we try that again Luna?" She smiled and moved back to her original spot, as did he. Bliss gave no further signal, and the two squared off again. Terry tried the Sloper quick draw with a stunner, only to find Luna using the most advanced shield yet and deflecting it back to him. Stupefy is hard to block with a shield, but at the distances Terry was firing at, it was possible with a super-strong shield (remember the starting spots are ten meters, or thirty-three feet, apart). He decided to test the shield and slowly moved closer to Luna, firing stunners in as rapid a succession as he could get away with. Luna either deflected them with her shield, or sidestepped them to preserve the shield's integrity as long as she could. When Terry got to five meters the shield started to vibrate, and she knew that it had maybe one more good hit left. When he did hit the shield, she allowed it to dissolve and rolled to her left. She quickly conjured a small set of muggle marbles and in a flash Banished them right at Terry's head at high speed, hitting him on the right side of his face as he had turned to follow her movements. He stumbled badly and went down to one knee, which was all Luna needed to hit him with a stunner right in the buttocks.....which was so Luna that it made all of their collected friends smile. She helped Terry to his feet, as was her wont, and he gave her a gentle hug as he massaged the marbled side of his face.

"At least it was to a Ravenclaw, and not some redheaded Gryffindor!" Ron and Ginny laughed at hearing that, and Harry quickly transfigured Neville's hair bright red, causing some giggles. Bliss was ready for the next match announcement:

"Ron Weasley."

"Ginny Weasley."

Oh my goodness, there had never been more wonderful irony in the tournament than there was now. This was another first for the tournament, siblings facing off in what could have been a match-up worthy of the final. They took their places after a quick hand squeeze, as Harry yelled out as loud as he could:

"Go Weasley!" which set off the crowd once again into giggles, as more students took up the chant.....which drowned out the pro-Darks attempt to resurrect Weasley Is Our King.

What followed was almost like ballet, as Ron and Ginny had fought so many times that they knew each others' strengths and weaknesses like no one else ever would (except Harry). They delighted the crowd by sending matching Bat Bogey Hexes at each other, and the bats began attacking each other rather than the two redheads. They stopped to watch the show for a moment, and started arguing loudly about whose bats were winning their own mass duel. Each thought that their own bats were superior of course, but eventually the bats killed each other off and nothing got settled that way.....all of this byplay being much to the amusement of the crowd.

Ginny tried her own version of the Disillusionment Charm, though she put a twist on it when she used the din of the crowd to run forward quickly at Ron.....who squashed that with a Firehose Charm that not only revealed her, but knocked her to the ground, and she barely avoided his stunner as she quickly snapped to her feet, throwing a Percussion Spell at him just to keep him off balance.....which it did, grazing him on his off hand, spraining it and allowing her time to get set again. They warily circled each other a few times and begun their attacks again, this time with matching Banshee Charms, which

simulated a banshee's cry (no really?). Everyone in the Great Hall covered their ears in pain, before the spells wore off after a minute. This continued on in similar fashion for the twenty longest minutes of Harry's, Bill's, and the twins' lives as they watched their brother and sister go at it. They stepped up the frequency of their attacks, even going so far as to use more Bat Bogey hexes in an attempt by Ginny to pull a fast one on her brother. She then noticed that Ron was favoring his wounded hand, and did everything she could do damage his good one, though she was unsuccessful. For his own strategy, Ron just countered everything she did, and tried his best to knock her off balance whenever possible.....and it was possible all the time.

In the end though, Ron was just physically stronger, and able to take more punishment. By the fifteenth minute they no longer had the energy to dodge each other, and had turned into exhausted zombies, nailing each other with hex after hex, both refusing to go down until Ginny just passed out right there in the middle of the floor. Ron was not far behind her as he slumped to his knees, but managed to keep conscious until Bliss examined his sister and pronounced her unconscious, and declared Ron to be the winner. He gave a halfhearted cheer and passed out himself. The crowd, who were quite whipped themselves just from watching, gave them a round of incredibly loud applause as Harry and the brothers leaped over the wall to wake up the two. Once they were helped to their feet (with a generous shot of Shepherd's personal recipe of Pepper-Up Potion, with its small shot of firewhiskey as the secret ingredient), Ginny hugged her brother tightly and raised his arm in victory. Anthony and Susan helped their girlfriend/boyfriend off the floor as exceptions were made this once and chairs were provided for both Ginny and Ron.

After all that, the next match could only be an anti-climax, but the show had to go on and Bliss read the names:

"Michael Corner."

"Lisa Turpin."

Another Ravenclaw match, which did guarantee them half of the Final Four. Cho was loudly cheering for Lisa as they took their places

(Harry had told Michael about the kiss offer during Quidditch and the other teen had just snickered and shaken his head). Michael was considered to be the weakest of the eight duelers today, but he again acquitted himself nicely, making Lisa work like crazy over the course of her ten minute victory. If there was one thing Michael had demonstrated over the course of his five wins so far was his ability to get hit with a spell and keep on coming, being able to shake it off and/or reverse it very quickly before the other person had a chance to hit him with any others in combination.....this talent met head on with Lisa's amazing ability to rapid-fire spells at a rate only Luna could really match (but had not needed to demonstrate yet). It was the age old 'irresistible force meets the immovable object.'....and in the magical world, the irresistible force usually wins out, as it did today.

Lisa spit out her spells as fast as she possibly could, and the barrage of ticklers, Confusion Charms, Tripping Jinxes, and Leg Locker Curses eventually overwhelmed Michael, who managed to graze her with two stunners and put up a halfway decent shield before he fell to ground, not being able to so quickly overcome the five simultaneous spells that were on him as he slumped over. She finished him off mercifully and the match was over. The two of them were good friends, and there were no hard feelings afterward, unlike Michael's last match.

Only one match to go, and as it was the last one, the two participants had been on pins and needles waiting for it. Bliss went through the formalities:

"Neville Longbottom."

"Blaise Zabini."

The last match was blessedly a quick one for Harry, as he was emotionally wrung out from the day, watching his friends do battle. Neville, whose talent for co-opting other peoples' interesting strategies was getting more and more notice (in a good way, nobody cares about plagiarism in a duel) also used Luna's marbles idea, but to much expanded effect, as he conjured many of them and kept them flying through the air in an impressive display of power and

concentration. He kept them flying around Blaise, who was not fast enough to banish them conventionally and not crazy enough (in this environment) to use Reducto on them. They attacked him without mercy and after a minute managed to knock his wand out of his grip and to the ground, whereupon Neville stopped controlling the marbles and summoned Blaise's wand to his hand. After shaking the cobwebs out of his head, Blaise decided that having been on the good end of the only surrender in the tournament, he should not let his girlfriend be in that place by herself:

"I surrender."

Neville tossed his wand back to him, and they warmly shook hands, Blaise congratulating him on such an innovative attack method.

"How many did you use?"

"About thirty I think, I lost count after I conjured the first dozen." They were still analyzing the attack even after they left the floor, with Blaise suggesting enhancements to a nodding Neville.

The Final Four was now set with Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Lisa Turpin, and Luna Lovegood. The smart money was still on Ron to win it all, but both matches would be interesting no matter which permutation happened. Two boys, two girls.....Two Gryffindors and two Ravenclaws.....it was almost like someone planned it that way.

Author's Note: It was brought up in a review that the Dursleys should have moved by the time Tom Riddle and company came calling, as I mentioned it in a chapter a few months ago. I didn't think to explain that the Dursleys turned down the 'request' to move and told Harry to mind his own business, that they would not do a darn thing just because he thought it was a good idea.....not very smart, I know, but very Dursley if you think about it.

Also, the shot by shot analysis of the student duels is in this chapter, and to make things more interesting for all of us, I'm making some spells up. Now I've been complimented (thank you) for the level of detail I've put into this story, but I'm not going to go so far as to make up Latin names for some of my made-up spells, so just suspend your disbelief that much for me. I'll use the 'proper' name for the spells where there is one though, probably. One more thing, I don't know the flammability of certain oils, and I'm probably wrong about what I'm going to do in one of the duels, but I have no desire to test it out in real life, I'm not a method writer.....and one final note: There is no true mention of religion in Harry Potter canon, indeed JK goes to great lengths to avoid it from what I can tell. Now the weddings of four of our characters take place on Easter Sunday, and if you want to assume that Harry and Co. go to services that morning, assume it. If you want to assume that they don't, assume that.

Monday, March 17th, 1997.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Sometime in the late afternoon

Narcissa Black Malfoy followed her sister into their Lord's study. She was somewhat apprehensive, since Voldemort rarely summoned her anymore, and they had not had a private chat in over a month. She knew there was some issue about Draco's place in the hierarchy, and that a few of Voldemort's counselors were advocating getting rid of him.....she suspected Pettigrew, but could not figure on who else (in fact most of the male Death Eaters disliked Draco, and would not have minded killing him themselves, he reminded them too much of his father).

There had been a lot of quiet activity on the Death Eater front in recent weeks. Recruitment was going very well, there were now 250 full Death Eaters, plus another thirty in some stage of their initiation.....about half of whom were out in the open, the other half still in the closet (so to speak). Loyalty was guaranteed due to copious amounts of Veritaserum, which was issued to all newcomers, and even to most of the old ones periodically. This was an inspiration gained from Bill Weasley ironically, since he had been doing the same thing to his own people.....and Pettigrew told his Master that it did not hurt to use any good ideas, even if the source was not one of their own. The squib population in Great Britain had declined now by over one hundred, as the Ministry was refusing to do anything to stop the killings other than continue to hunt down Voldemort as best they could.....which they would have done anyway. The Death Eaters had lost three green recruits to muggle shotguns, put in use by a desperate squib father to save his wife and child (who was herself just two years old and very magical). Surprisingly Voldemort had not reacted with rage to the shotgun news ('we are trying to exterminate them after all, at least the filth put up a fight there').

She entered the study and Bella stayed with them, closing the door behind her. Voldemort liked having Bella sit in on meetings like this, another eyes and ears. He smiled somewhat pleasantly at the woman before him. She was forty years old now, but still cut a very attractive figure.

"Hello Narcissa, how are you today?"

"I'm well my Lord, and yourself?"

"Just dandy thank you. We need to talk about something Narcissa, it's a talk you have been waiting for, for some time now."

"Is this about Draco? Are you giving him up to Potter?"

"Perhaps, but I still have not made up my mind about that yet. I'm talking about the chat we had the night your dear departed husband was unfortunately killed.....about you volunteering to end your widowhood." It was a sign of his confidence that he had no trouble

telling Narcissa that he was contemplating betraying Draco, he knew where her loyalties ultimately lied.

She gave a start at hearing that, this was more than she had dared to dream.....unless there was a catch somewhere.....he could not be thinking of giving her to Pettigrew, or one of the other senior Death Eaters? The percentage of women in their ranks was rather low (around twenty percent), and while most of the men got their thrills through violence.....she steeled herself to ask the question:

“Would I be wed to you my Lord?”

“Of course Narcissa, if that is what you want.....I force people to do a lot of things, but on this one I can restrain myself from ordering it.”

“My Lord it would be the greatest honor of my life.” She bowed low and was smiling very widely.

“Good, you will make a wonderful Empress when we take over the country. We will do the ceremony a week from Sunday.....right as Bill Weasley is getting married himself, I love irony. Now of course we will be needing to conceive a child quickly.” This drop-in brought her up short, and out of the daydreaming she was already doing about being the Empress.....child?

“Child, my Lord?”

“Our child, my heir and successor. I’m sorry but Draco simply will not do, whatever we decide to do with him, and Potter will not turn to our side.....so we must go to this option. A quick conception will give us a birth by the end of the year, and I have a special potion in the works to ensure that it will be a son.” She was not wild about the idea of giving birth at her age, or carrying a child.....but if this was the tiny price she had to pay for the power coming to her, so be it.

“Whatever you wish my Lord, I’m am always at your pleasure.” He smiled.

“Oh there will be pleasure enough for the both of us my dear Narcissa.....in fact I’ll make you a deal: If you are with child by the

end of April, I will spare Draco from the revenge of Potter and his fanatics, the idea will be dropped completely.”

“I will do everything I have to do to make it so my Lord.” Narcissa was not the pointiest poker near the fireplace, and missed the two loopholes that the deal: the first was that during the invasion of the castle, anything could happen.....and second, he was not promising to protect Draco from the other Death Eaters, which was a concern.

“Excellent. I will leave you to plan the details of the wedding, spare no expense. Now if you will excuse us a moment, I need to go over some plans with your sister.” She bowed low again, and left the room. With a jerk of his head, Voldemort motioned for Bella to go into the other room, where he soon followed.

Saturday, March 22nd, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

2:00 pm

To everyone’s surprise, Dumbledore did the introductions today, as he had a word or ten to say about the tournament and its semi-finalists. The entire school was packed into the room, along with every teacher and most of the Wizengamot and Hogwarts Board of Directors, including Minister Fudge. They were there to see the student duels, but most of the adults really wanted to see Harry in action, and against one of his teachers no less. Lisa’s parents, Madeline and Richard, were in the crowd, as was Neville’s grandmother and Luna’s father, all four of them guests of Dumbledore’s.....and all of Ron’s brothers were in attendance as well, but they were frequent visitors to their old stomping grounds, as Harry had gotten them official ‘instructor’ status with the DA.

“Welcome to the semi-final round of the 1st Annual Hogwarts Dueling Tournament. We will have two student matches, and two exhibition matches featuring three members of our faculty and an ad hoc member of the faculty. Our final four student duelers present an interesting cross-section of our fine school. Two boys, two girls.....only one athlete out of four, in a discipline that the

uninitiated would think would require a great athlete to succeed.....our two female duelers being at the top of the fifth and sixth year classes academically.....a relative late bloomer, who when he found his confidence, unlocked power that few in our little world could think of having.....and a young man whose courage and bravery have been tested far too often for someone his age, with unmatched results. These are the kinds of examples that Hogwarts has always thrived on over the years, and I'm proud of all four of these young people, as I am of all of our tournament participants.....other than a few well known exceptions of course (there was some light laughter in the crowd). Professor Bliss, if you will." Bliss walked over with her mixing bowl and four slips of paper:

"Just so you know, I'm going to award this bowl to the winner as their trophy (titters from the crowd)."

"Lisa Turpin."

"Neville Longbottom."

Much buzz in the crowd as the match-ups were set. All eyes went to Harry briefly as the implications of his best friend dueling his girlfriend in the second match sunk in. Lisa and Neville went over the wall and hugged each other warmly before they took their positions, earning a round of applause from the crowd just for that (The Zach Smith incident having received considerable coverage in The Daily Prophet and the Quibbler). By quirk of fate, Neville's grandmother was standing next to Lisa's parents, and they all smiled at each other as the two friends prepared for battle. Shepherd was the referee, so that a not up to full strength Bliss could rest for her exhibition match. He raised his hand into the air:

"Begin!"

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" Lisa whipped her wand up and tried to end the match in one shot, as she shot the two stunners to either side of where Neville was standing, hoping he would dodge one of the directions on instinct and be hit.....not to happen though, as Neville simply went to his knees and ducked. His head was under

both spells though, and while Lisa was waiting to see if he got hit, he went ahead with his planned first move.

“Tripper!” Right at her ankles, helped by his own low position, and it nailed her flush and put her on her back, where she quickly rolled to her left as Neville fired another:

“Rictusempra!” Which hit just to her right, missing her. From her back she fired her own version:

“Rictusempra!” This hit Neville on the hip and he started twitching as he tried to fight off the spell without using his wand, with which he used:

“Percussio!” A percussion hex that would have hit Lisa full on the chest if Neville had not twitched right as he said it. As it was, it still caught her on the left shoulder and there was a slight crack heard, as the crowd was actually pretty quiet at this point. Both Lisa and Neville were well liked by their peers, and there was no particular favorite.....though the betting money was solidly behind Neville, even though no one thought he would be as harsh on Lisa as he had been his past opponents. He moved forward a couple of meters and assessed the damage he had caused, the tickler having faded off.

Lisa’s wand arm was her right, fortunately for her, and it reflexively went up to touch her hurt shoulder and she was grimacing in pain. She performed a quick healing spell.

“Mendario.” which seemed to help her shoulder.....though it did nothing to help the oil slick that now was all around her as Neville was spraying what on first sniff smelled like cooking oil on the floor, taking advantage of her self-healing duties. He then backed off and started lobbing spells at her from his original spot, nothing major, just:

“Tripper!”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

“Blinder!”

All of them were in quick succession, and Neville was circling her with every spell fired, making her turn as much as possible. Lisa managed to dodge all of them, but was slipping and sliding all over the place as she frantically tried to come up with a counter-spell to the oil, not having the balance to try and get a shot off against Neville.

“Sandio!” This spell shot sand out of her wand, much in the same fashion as the oil had come out. It was not a perfect solution, there was still some oil on her trainers, and the sand didn’t completely cover up the oil, but she could move again.....except that Neville fired off:

“Incendio!” He did this right at the oil on the outside of the sand. Now cooking oil is not the most easily flammable oil that one could use.....but if you set fire to it, it will smoke something awful, which was the whole idea. Soon the whole of the area around Lisa, in a three meter radius from her, was covered in smoke. Neville, who was not the most fleet afoot of the students, began running around the perimeter he set up, firing more advanced spells now, ones that Lisa could not see through the smoke until it was almost too late:

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Lisa was grazed by the first two, and would have been hit full on by the third if she had not been knocked to the floor by the two stunners, which did not actually put her out, but were still like two body punches. Lisa was a very slight girl, just 5'3", 105 pounds (that's slight isn't it?), and the punishment she was receiving was tiring her out rapidly.....but delivering it was not treating Neville too well either, as he was already out of breath from his movements around his self-made perimeter.....Neville not being in the ideal physical condition for him, since he had long resisted the running club (as had Ron). The disadvantage of the smoke haze for him was that he could not see the results of his work, making it hard to follow up. Lisa got unsteadily to her feet, and loosed a few hexes at where she thought

Neville had been last, still too hurt to be willing to move forward, using the smoke to delay and recover:

“Engorgio!”

“Reducio!” Those would have been interesting if they had both hit, and likely would have put Neville down for awhile, since they would have enlarged him and shrunk him simultaneously, causing him quite a lot of pain. Neville was on the opposite side of her though, listening carefully for where she might be in the only slightly lessening fog. He moved right on to the edge of the haze.

“Accio Wand!”

“Accio Wand!”

He fired the two spells close to where he thought Lisa was, and one hit pay dirt, summoning Lisa’s wand to his off hand. He stood there then, still panting a little bit as he caught his breath and waited for her to come out.....so she could either surrender or be hit with a mercy stunner.

Lisa stood in the barely receding fog and considered her options for a brief second. She could surrender, take her stunner, or.....she looked through the smoke and saw where Neville was standing, holding both their wands. She tested the sand underneath her feet and decided to take a chance, as there was little to lose. She braced herself on the sand, and took three steps until she hit the oil, and then went down into what would be called a baseball slide, if the sport of baseball was one that the seventeen year old pureblood witch had ever heard of.....and she did it perfectly under the circumstances, crashing right into Neville and landing them both in a heap. She grabbed for the first wand she could find and managed to get to her feet first, only to find out that the wand in her hand was Neville’s, and to be then hit with a:

“Percussio!” from her own wand, as Neville regularly practiced with other peoples’ wands (and had only eight months of practice with the wand in Lisa’s hand), just in case. It did not help him though, that he was laying there with a broken leg, as Lisa’s slide tackle had nailed

him right in the left shin. He fought back the pain though and knocked her to the ground again with his percussion hex, right to the abdomen. He tried to get up but couldn't put any weight on his leg, and the floor around him was still too slick to stand up on one foot.

Lisa was not quite unconscious, but she had taken more shots today than in the whole of her earlier matches combined, and she was very weak. She managed to put up a relatively strong shield, one that covered all of her limited profile.....being flat on the ground and all. Neville saw this correctly as her last stand, and got up painfully to his knees and began battering it down from a range of a meter and a half:

“Percussio!”

“Percussio!”

“Percussio!” The third one did the trick, and slammed into her left foot, knocking her another meter and breaking the foot in the bargain. The pain did not quite knock her out, but she was capable of no more spells as Neville followed it up with the coup de grace:

“Stupefy!”

The stunner hit her on her bad foot and knocked her out. The match was over and Neville was into the finals. The crowd gave a large ovation as Harry and Mandy Brocklehurst each went over the wall to help their friends to their feet (after Mandy revived Lisa). Madam Pomfrey clucked over each of them, as Neville had a broken shin and Lisa a broken foot. She set their broken bones on the spot, and conjured casts for them so that they would be secure while waiting to be magically healed in the Hospital Wing.....after the dueling was over, as both wanted to see the other three matches. Lisa, who also needed some work done on her shoulder, congratulated Neville for a well thought out strategy, and Neville praised her resilience.....and both were given chairs with which to watch the next match.

Another formality, but the names still needed to be read:

“Ron Weasley.”

“Luna Lovegood.”

Harry stood between Ginny and the seated Neville as he forced himself to watch every move of what was about to occur. He knew either way that he was going to be a loser in this match, and his wand was not even out. In his heart of hearts he thought that it would be better for Ron to win, because Ron cared so much more about the tournament than Luna did, though she did care some.....but this was not something he was at all willing to make public, or even tell his other friends. Ginny was openly rooting for her brother, while Neville was silent, as he did not want to let on who he was rooting for (but in his own heart, he would rather face Luna in the final than Ron). Ron and Luna gave each other a hug as well, and took their places.

“Begin!”

Ron rolled forward in a tuck and sprung up two meters closer to Luna, only to be met with:

“Spider Bogey!” The spiders were quickly upon him and started to climb over him. Ron had overcome a lot of fears over the last few years, but his fear of spiders was still a work in progress.....that said, he knew instantly that he needed to worry more about Luna.

“Percussio!” A percussion hex nailed Luna in the stomach and knocked her down, while Ron moved quickly to his right, exterminating spiders all the while. By the time he had them all gotten rid of, Luna was back on her feet, wheezing (no pun intended), but standing up straight, mentally nagging herself for not anticipating what happened, as either Ron had taught the hex to Neville, or the other way around.....but both loved to use it whenever possible, though Ron’s was not as powerful as Neville’s..

“That was a dirty trick with the spiders Luna!”

“You have to overcome your fears Ronald!” Both were said with smiles, and those present were reminded that this wasn’t some Death Eater test, but a friendly competition.....especially given that both these young kids had faced Death Eaters head on, and had not lost

(the Department of Mysteries can realistically be called a tactical victory for Harry's side, but a draw overall in terms of raw combat).

They circled each other warily, and simultaneously fired:

“Tripper!”

“Spider Bogey!” The twist was that Luna managed to trip Ron right as he sent his own set of spiders at Luna. The tripper landed Ron flat on his back and his head slammed on the ground with a loud thwack. Luna did not much care for spiders either, and she was almost dancing trying to keep them off of her, while a dazed Ron quickly rolled to his left, almost on instinct and fired off a weak:

“Windario!” a wind spell that hit full blast on Luna and definitely annoyed the four spiders that were still on her. She was pushed back a little, though not as much as she would have been with Ron’s full faculties involved in the spell. She managed to get rid of the agitated arachnids as Ron was still shaking his head, something was clearly wrong. Luna saw that he was injured, and was sorely tempted to wait a few seconds to let him clear his head.....but she knew that if she did that, and he won, he would feel the victory to be tainted, and thus devalued. While she thought this out, it gave Ron just enough time to whip out:

“Stupefy!” which just missed her head by a hair, and jolted her back into the competition. Ron was weaving slightly, but was on his feet all the same. Luna hated herself for what she had to do, but knew that Ron wanted only her best, and getting him off his feet was her best chance.

“Tripper!” Ron had a shield up now, and managed to block it. His head still hurt like crazy, and he was starting to get a little panicky about it. The shield he had up would buy him a bit of time, but he knew that Luna would get him eventually if he didn’t finish things off soon, his head was pounding more and more every second. He summoned all his energy for one last spread:

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

They were not shouted in quick succession, but over the course of six seconds, as the first hit Luna’s robes (thus doing nothing concrete, but giving her a start all the same), the second got her in the right hand, forcing her to drop her wand, and the third directly into her sternum, knocking her out and ending the match.....a match that was much shorter than most of the crowd had expected, given Ron’s last match, the twenty minute mini-marathon with his sister. Ron, like Neville before him, was really too injured to take much pleasure in his victory. Pomfrey wasted no time rushing over to him as he was swaying a bit unsteadily. She did a scan of his head immediately and pronounced her verdict:

“Just a concussion folks, nothing to be alarmed over, no broken bones or any other damage. Some rest and you will be as good as new Mr. Weasley.” After a few more acid comments from Pomfrey about how dangerous the tournament was becoming (though Ron had been injured on a simple tripping hex, and Neville on a non-magical slide tackle), Ron was allowed to take his place in the stands, in another chair placed right next to Neville. Luna was being woken up by Shepherd, and her first words were easily surmised:

“How is Ronald? Is he ok?” After being assured that Ron was going to be fine (in a day or two anyway) she left the dueling area to be met with a big hug by Harry, and friendly hugs by the rest of her circle, including Ron.....who had so long overcome his reticence about Luna that he wondered who the stupid kid was who had never liked his neighbor/schoolmate? Bill and the twins were ecstatic and were cheering their heads off, and promising Ron a fun celebration.....the next night, when he fully ‘there’ and could appreciate it better. Gryffindors were very happy as well, the two hundred points to the winner was now theirs regardless, and combined with the two hundred the Trio had gotten for saving Hermione, and the expected Quidditch Cup win, seemed to clinch the House Cup for them in a landslide, and it was still only March.

Dumbledore took the floor again and began his teacher exhibition spiel:

"Now then folks, we have our teacher exhibition now. We wanted the students to go first so that any butterflies would be gotten out of the way as soon as possible. We will have two duels today, and one next week before Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom square off. In this exhibition, our participants are: Professor Melissa Bliss, Defense Against the Dark Arts; Professor Filius Flitwick, Charms; Professor Minerva McGonagall, Transfiguration; and Harry Potter, head of the student's Defense Association and widely acknowledged as the finest Defense student here in more than a few centuries. The rules for these two matches are somewhat relaxed from those involving the regular students, though of course no Dark Magic will be allowed.....and all three Professors have agreed to hold no ill will toward Mr. Potter, grade-wise, if he should defeat them (much laughter). We had a private draw earlier this morning, and the first match-up will be Professor Bliss versus Professor Flitwick. Melissa, Filius, please take your places."

This fulfilled the not so private dreams of most of the fifth, sixth, and seventh year students, who delighted in telling the younger students about the all too brief duel between Snape and Lochhart four years ago.....and who had wished ever since to see two of their teachers go at it in a duel (Umbridge and her Auror toadies ambushing McGonagall didn't really count)....and the thought of Harry being allowed to slaughter McGonagall in full view of the students was almost too good to be true. Bliss and Flitwick took their places.

"Begin!"

The hallmarks of Melissa Bliss as a dueler in Auror training had been her foot speed and rapid fire capability.....she was not terribly proficient in actual defense, other than shield work, she was much more of an offensive dueler, when fully healthy that is. That said, the vast majority of her actual Auror service (the training is two to three years, depending on how quickly one passes the tests and trials), which numbered five years, involved no dueling, other than refresher training. Auror work after the mop-up of Godric's Hollow and before Voldemort's rebirth involved little more than standard police and

intelligence work, and was not conducive to mass wand fights between Good and Evil. Still, she had a knowledge and a patience that made her an excellent teacher, and was perhaps to be her calling.

Filius Flitwick was in much the same boat, having been a Hogwarts teacher now for over sixty of his eighty-seven years. He had fought on the edges of the first Voldemort War, and been in the thick of things against Grindewald.....but that had been a long time ago. He now was just a simple educator, far and away the most popular teacher in Hogwarts, though like many, his skills had gotten a bit rusty. He delighted in the progress of Harry in Charms, and was beside himself when he learned of Harry's Governor Award in that subject, just like his mother (Lily Evans also won the award for Ancient Runes, which turned out to be her very brief calling), and beating out Hermione and a mess of Ravenclaws to do so. He knew realistically that none of the three teachers would likely beat Harry in a duel, Harry had both Ron's toughness and Neville's coldness, in spades.....and he doubted that Minerva would even land a shot on him, her devotion to Hermione at Harry's expense had not escaped notice by the rest of the staff, and he had seen Harry's smile when their private draw was done.

Flitwick took the first shots and threw a series of Confusion Charms at her, missing her completely as she dodged them. Bliss was not one hundred percent, but was still plenty agile.....and Flitwick had vowed to himself that he was going to take it easy on her after what she had been through two weeks previously, he had no ego to stroke here, and it mattered little to him if he won.....though he would like to face Harry, just to see what the lad would do.

For her part, Bliss felt she had something to prove, as the new kid on the Defense block, after so many disappointments. She knew that it would be harder to hit someone as small as Flitwick with most spells, with his tiny profile, so she took a different tack:

"Reducto!" This elicited a mass gasp from the crowd.....until they saw the shot fall well short and to the left.....which was by design, though it tore up the floor a bit. She repeated the spell a few times and soon had the floor around Flitwick in pieces. He was not firing

much at her, just some weak jinxes that she easily dodged as she was doing her demolition work around him, he wanted to see what she was up to.

What she was up to was soon apparent, as she animated the stone chunks from the floor into little soldiers and they began attacking Flitwick, mostly by pounding into his legs. Bliss was not silent during this either, as she fired stunner after stunner at her colleague, trying to play on his being distracted.....but if there was one thing about Flitwick, it was that he never got flustered, he was something of a Zen master of calm (one reason Harry liked Sensei John Yamura so much was that he reminded him of Flitwick). He managed to dodge all of the stunners and sent a couple of blasting hexes at the stone soldiers, putting most of them in pieces and scattering them.....but not for long, as he levitated them into a into a swarm and banished them straight at Bliss at very high speed.

Bliss never stood a chance as the stone missiles blasted into her legs and torso, and she slammed to the ground unconscious. Dumbledore, who was acting as referee for this particular match due to the Bliss/Shepherd friendship, checked her over and pronounced the duel over, Flitwick had won, in another startlingly quick match. The students less loose another large cheer, though they would have done the same for Bliss, who along with her friend Charles was right behind the Charms teacher in terms of popularity (Shepherd was worshipped by the vast majority of Potions students, since he was so opposite to Snape). The Headmaster woke her up, and she got her feet mostly unhurt, she was just bruised up a lot where she had been hit. The two teachers shook hands and left the floor.

Dumbledore did some quick repair work on the floor and introduced the final match of the day:

“Minerva McGonagall.”

“Harry Potter.”

The crowd, most of whom knew they would suffer for this come Transfiguration time, was unabashedly for Harry as the two took their places. Harry had been of two minds about this duel in particular. He

was one of the few students who were in the know about McGonagall's future promotion, and certainly did not want to antagonize her.....but at the same time he wanted to peel off some hide for what he (and a lot of other people, students and faculty) perceived as her Hermione bias, as opposed to the relatively little help he himself got from her. He knew that if he took the match seriously that he would win, but the inner debate was on whether to win fast, or exact some retribution. He still had not decided as he took his place on the floor.

"Begin!"

McGonagall threw out a brace of stunners at Harry, which he easily dodged.....with both hands behind his back, causing some curious looks on the faces of most observers.....until they saw what he was up to, he had taken out a large handful of Filibuster Fireworks (the only non-WWW product in that milieu that he would use, as the twins didn't make fireworks). He continued to dodge her spells, by the two minute mark she had fired over twenty of them and hit nothing but air, and none were really that close. Harry's reaction times were on display for a crowd wondering when he was going to use his own wand. After getting his heart started (the jogging four were now running twelve kilometers every morning, and Harry, Justin, and Anthony were openly debating on whether to try to join the Rowling School's track and field team), he finally decided to start his show.....he activated the fireworks and whipped them toward an already somewhat tired McGonagall from behind his back, nearly scaring the crap out of her as she wondered what he could be throwing at her.

The fireworks landed right where Harry had hoped, directly in front of her and on each side, they had been a handful and he had practiced throwing them to spread out upon impact. To say that they went off with a BANG is an understatement, and smoke and bright colors surrounded her as they simultaneously detonated, temporarily blinding her and certainly disorienting her.

Harry did not hesitate with his next attack, as he judged that his cat-like teacher needed some visitors from the animal and insect kingdoms.

“Locustia!”

“Serpensortia!”

“Serpensortia!”

The first one sent a flock of locusts right toward McGonagall in a wave, the second and third created two medium sized snakes.

“Go toward her and distract her, but do not harm her in any way!” This was said in Parseltongue of course, and would only work on spell created snakes, real snakes were as likely to tell you what orifice you could stick your orders in. The crowd was in bedlam as the creations sped toward her, not that she knew they were coming. The locusts dived on McGonagall through the smoke and haze, and the snakes slithered around her, though they never made actual contact. Harry quickly cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and began to walk toward his Professor.

In the crowd, Moody (who could see Harry’s movements through his magical eye), just turned toward Dumbledore and started cackling.

“Oh of course the lad needs to be protected, he’s helpless.” Bill and the twins too were looking at each other and grinning, the fireworks had worked even better than they had practiced.

Meanwhile McGonagall was frantically dealing with her new friends as she tried to stop the locusts from snacking on her, and was dancing madly in an effort to avoid the snakes, not knowing that they were instructed not to touch her. After a few minutes, and more than a couple of banishment charms and Finite Incantatums, she was clear and the smoke was almost gone.....but so where was Potter? She had watched Ron’s butchery of Hermione and remembered the Disillusionment Charm and how well it worked, and what Harry was likely to do with it. She readied her wand to start a water spraying spell when it happened.....

Harry had quickly gotten close to her and satisfied himself to watch her struggle with the locusts and snakes, enjoying the jumping

around she was doing. When she got done and was quickly looking around for him, he acted. He quickstepped the last meter between them and yanked her wand right from her hand, using his own wand to reveal himself in the process. He trained both wands on her and again imitated Ron:

"I believe a surrender is in order Professor McGonagall." She did not know whether to crap or go blind right now, she couldn't believe that he had taken her so easily. She couldn't help but giggle inside when she thought about what happened to the last time she was stunned, by Umbridge, and that it was Potter in part who had gotten revenge for her (to this day she mimicked horse sounds when she wanted to get students' attention in her classes).

"Well done Mr. Potter, well done. I surrender the match." They shook hands, and she even turned toward the crowd with a smile as they cheered her annihilation. Far from being pissed off at how she had lost, she was in fact quite relieved that he was so good, this would give Voldemort something to think about once he heard about it from Miss Parkinson (who unbeknownst to her and Draco, had her mail strictly monitored and copied). As they left the floor together, she whispered in Harry's ear:

"Fifty points to Gryffindor for not being hit Mr. Potter." They smiled at each, and Harry was inwardly very happy at the route he took to victory.....and the fact that he did not have to show all his surprises, leaving some for Flitwick next week. His friends all ganged up on him, celebrating his win, and its ease.

Sunday, March 23rd, 1997

Room of Requirement, Hogwarts

2:00 pm

The members of the Executive Council filed in to what heretofore had been a forbidden room for their projects. Harry and Bill had gotten there ahead of time to put the Silencing Charms in place, as they needed the particular talents of the Room for what they had in mind. Harry's vision of the room had it more in the shape of a rectangle

than before, with targets at the west end, a large supply of brick and wooden boards, and a long tape measure on each side of the wall.

"OK, I know you are all wondering what we're doing back in here and not in our safe haven of Dungeon Seven. I want to do some experiments today, to see how powerful you guys are, and what kind of distances you can shoot spells at. You're going to line up at various intervals in the room and try to hit the targets at the end with a small variety of offensive spells. This way we can calibrate better our defense, and put people where it would best suit them." Bill took it from there.

"Harry and I want to stress that this is not a contest, no awards will be given, nor any bragging done. The only exception to this will be that Neville and Ron won't be involved today, as we don't want to give either of them an advantage next week.....plus they're both still a bit banged up from the damage that two girls did to them yesterday (much snickering, that Ron and Neville took with good humor.....they were the winners after all). Those two, along with Harry and I, will be acting as the guinea pigs for some of the spell testing as well." Harry then lined everyone up about ten meters from the wall, and set up five bricks on tables along it. He put five people in a line and had them shoot Reducto at the bricks. After observing the results, he put new bricks up and had them back up five meters, then again with five more meters. After a max distance of thirty meters, he repeated the drill with the next five members, and so on. It turned out that Blaise had the most power up close with the spell, while Ginny was tops as far as distance went.

They repeated the same kind of drill with a few other spells, then Harry and his proctors did a little self-sacrifice, as they did a similar experiment with Stupefy, with each of them getting knocked out a few times by the first contestants, who then took their turns as the practice dummies. After it was over, and everyone was laid out on conjured couches, resting.....Blaise again was the strongest in the short range, as he had been in all the spells, while Lisa was best long range. That was a prevailing characteristic amongst the Council members, as the boys tended to be more powerful and deadly up close, while the girls could do it better from a distance. In spite of the warning that it was not a contest, there were some competitive types

(mostly Ravenclaws) who were constantly checking their scores and asking to do it again.....which Harry allowed, except for the Stupefy trials.

What he didn't tell everyone was that he and Bill had done the same tests the night before, and they both outstripped all of the Council members by solid margins, except for Blaise in the short range, whom they just barely beat. This was to be expected though, as Harry and Bill were considered by Dumbledore and the rest of the faculty to be the two most powerful wizards under the age of fifty in Great Britain, with Neville, Blaise, and Bellatrix Lestrange rounding out the top five (the faculty did this every five years at the request of the Ministry, and their last evaluation had been in September).....the list impacted harshly by the absences of James Potter, Sirius Black, and Severus Snape, due to their untimely deaths (all three would be 38 years old or thereabouts if they had lived), and Lily Evans Potter would have made the top ten as well.

These tests, while they drained everyone quite a bit, proved to be very popular, and Harry was persuaded to agree to hold another such series in a month's time, after the last Quidditch match. Bill thought it a great idea, as it would give everyone an incentive to practice their spell work, and not just work on tactics and strategy, which was about half of the Council's work during meetings. Harry knew that such tests would be too much for the larger DA, but he liked the idea of a Executive Council Olympics, having seen a few hours of the real muggle Olympics on a pub's television in August (Atlanta). He had long thought that one of Hogwarts' problems was that there was so little competition outside of class, just Quidditch, and that there was a need for a healthy outlet for students' competitive instincts.

Afterward, Harry took the twins aside for a private chat, not even Ron and Neville stuck around for it, as he had filled them in earlier.

"I have a couple more projects for you two to work on, if you have the time." The twins said in unison:

"We're listening."

"The first thing, I want you to see if you can do some kind of duplication of the Marauders Map." This caused them a moment of pause, as they considered this. Fred was the one who replied.

"This wouldn't be the first time we attempted something like that, we experimented with it a few times over the years that we had it."

"Yeah, but you were fifteen when you had it last.....now you're much older, wiser, and craftier."

"Flattery will get you everywhere of course Harry, but.....Are you willing to risk us ruining it? Not that we wouldn't take every precaution.....but this isn't some television that can be easily replaced.....and all of the original makers of it are either dead or Dark."

"I have the utmost faith in you guys, I know you can either do it, or at least not ruin it.....and I authorize you to take any chance you deem reasonable."

"That works for us I suppose. What was your second project?"

"This involves something we can replace easily, I want you to experiment with the two-way mirrors, to see if you can make them more than two-way.....much more." George grinned at hearing that:

"We're way ahead of you there mate, that's been Lee's private project for the last two months, we figured we would need something like that and set him to work. It's a funny combination of duplication charms and other enhancements, and you have to get it just right to even make it three-way. Right now he's got it to where he can get five mirrors on the same clear signal, and eight mirrors if you don't mind the signal clarity cut in half, with no images." Harry's mind quickly processed this information, even a five-way mirror would greatly aid their castle defense plans, much more than before.

"Terrific, how many mirrors has he gone through?"

"About twenty so far, those things are pretty hard to ruin, but he's giving it a go at them." That was good news, in a battle he wouldn't have to carry so many mirrors on his person, though they weren't especially heavy, even a dozen or so like he had planned. He looked at his friends and wrestled again with something he had been trying not to tell them.

"Hang on a second guys, I want to tell you something but I need Ron and Ginny back here first." He took out their mirrors and called them, asking them to come back to the Room, and alone. Harry always carried mirrors for Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Bill, Blaise, and Justin.....the latter two so he would have instant communication with someone in every house. Between those seven mirrors and his myriad of portkeys, Harry's robes were festooned with pockets on the inside.....it had taken him more than a bit of time to memorize where everything was so that he could access it on a second's notice.

Ron and Ginny soon came back, and Harry braced himself for what he was about to tell them. The two younger Weasleys wondered what this was about, and why Neville and Luna weren't there.

"Guys, I've delayed sharing this with you, but I can't any longer.....A while ago I received some information that implied that Percy had been approached to be a Death Eater." He cringed a bit and waited for the explosion.....which he certainly got, at least from Ron and Ginny. Their combined "WHAT!" could be heard a kilometer away. The twins couldn't have looked less surprised though. Ron found his voice first:

"Where did you hear this? Did they tell if he accepted?"

"I can't say where I got it Ron, I'm not even supposed to be telling you now.....and I don't know if he accepted, only that the approach was made."

"So why tell us now?"

"We need to be prepared in case they try something at the wedding. Now I know The Burrow is under Fidelius, but Percy must know that area pretty well, you have to wonder how hard it would be for him to

at least find the general area, though he wouldn't be able to see the house specifically." This caused some thoughtful moments amongst the four Weasleys, before Ginny had an altogether different question, put toward the twins:

"Ok you two, when Harry said that about Percy you did not bat an eye between you, what gives?" The twins sighed a bit, and Fred replied to her:

"We've heard a few rumors about it, from some of our contacts in Knockturn Alley. We told Bill, but didn't want to say anything to you guys until we found out something more definitive.....and we haven't yet."

"But he couldn't turn Dark could he? I mean I know he loves power and authority.....but he's still mom and dad's son." Ron's eyes were still closed as he weighed in.

"No he's not Ginny, not really.....I mean yeah, biologically he is.....but he's always been different. I can see him accepting the offer, in fact I would be kind of shocked if he turned them down. I know he wasn't invited to the wedding, I asked Bill.....but I wouldn't put it past him to try and wreck it. Imagine if the Death Eaters could stage a raid there? The entire light side will be in attendance." George now functioned as the voice of reason, sort of:

"Fidelius is supposed to be unbreakable, and we have to trust it. We all know who the secret keeper is (Bill) and he would never betray it. Grimmauld Place is the same scenario, there are multiple Death Eaters who spent a lot of time there as kids, Bellatrix and Narcissa, but the Voldemort and his toadies have never been able to lay a hand on it. We can't be looking over our shoulders everywhere we go. Fred and I are in plain sight in Diagon Alley and they've never tried anything.....and we have hidden Dark Detectors all over the place in the shop. All of us will have our wands in our dress robes next Sunday, and if anyone wants a fight, we'll certainly give it to them.....but let's concentrate on Bill and Ashley next Sunday, this will be the happiest day of their lives, and it's our duty to give it to them." On this surprisingly sage advice, everyone nodded and made the walk back to Gryffindor Tower.

Friday, March 28th, 1997

Hogwarts was now set to go on its Spring/Easter break, which really was only four and a half days. Classes on Friday ended at lunch time, and would not resume until Wednesday. Students were not encouraged to leave the castle, and permission was granted only for family events and specific plans.....and usually it was only the muggleborn students who asked (though Hermione never had). Bill's wedding qualified as a family event, and to most people's surprise, Dumbledore did not make an issue of how many students were attending. All told there were fifteen students going, basically the trunk circle minus Seamus and Dean, and they easily got permission to leave Hogwarts Saturday night and come back the next evening, after the wedding festivities. This was helped considerably by the facts that Dumbledore himself was to be a guest at the ceremony (Bill felt it was a necessary trade-off to get the students released for the weekend), and that The Burrow was under Fidelius, and could be accessed via the floo in the Headmaster's Office.

Dumbledore had heard the Percy rumors like everyone else in the know, but discounted the possibility of a raid in Ottery St. Catchpole, his belief in Fidelius was just that strong. Nor did he think that an attack on Hogwarts was possible at this time (though he would have been staggered to know of Voldemort's true numbers). Since he believed this, and Bill and the rest of the Order knew he believed it, he felt that he did not have a leg to stand on if he had denied the kids permission to go.....and he would have a case in theory with everyone but Ron and Ginny, Bill's only blood relatives in the school.....but there were some potential battles where the payoff just did not justify the fight, and this was one of them. He was looking forward to a happy time for his chosen side, and a celebration of sorts.

Notable as well was the totally and completely unchanged relationship between Ron and Neville, who still hung out together just as much as they had in previous weeks, despite the fact that they were due to fight in the tournament final. Harry had resisted temptation to request that they not try any mind games on each other, he ultimately felt that it was not really his place. It was unnecessary though, as both Ron and Neville realized that they had already won in

a lot of ways, faced down many demons, and proven what they needed to not only to themselves, but their friends and enemies.....especially Harry, who each of them wanted to see them as an equal for something they accomplished, not for just being good guys (he did, but knew that they would have trouble believing it).

The betting money had now shifted to Neville, though not by much, and rumor had it that as much as 1500 galleons total was in play among the various students. Harry continually refused to bet on anyone, there was already a tiny rumor sub-current that the match was to be fixed, which Harry had heard, and he did not want to give credence to it by betting on one of his friends.....but privately with Luna, he stuck with his prediction to Biller that Neville would win.

Saturday, March 29th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

2:00 pm

The air in the Great Hall was thick with anticipation as the collected students, faculty, and honored guests were eagerly awaiting the last two matches of the tournament: Ron versus Neville, and Harry versus Flitwick. Ron and Neville had been canvassed the day before by McGonagall about whether they wanted to go first, so as to know exactly when they were to compete.....or second, so that they could have the prestige of the very last match, which all the organizers felt was only their due. Neither boy really cared that much, but in the end they chose the second match. Bliss went out and announced the first match:

“Harry Potter.”

“Filius Flitwick.”

The two of them shook hands and took their places. The crowd of students, however much they liked Flitwick, were firmly on Harry's side, even the few pro-Darks, who joined the rest in wanting to see a mere student come out on top.

“Begin!”

Harry surprised all of them by attacking first, throwing out a spread of stunners right at Flitwick’s feet, putting all his power into them.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

The spells hit right where Flitwick’s feet would have been if he had not leapt into the air.....and his leap was magnified when the spells hit the ground as intended, creating a pulse in the air that sent the tiny teacher sailing back another five meters and on to his back. He quickly recovered and got to his feet, only to be confronted with another problem, Harry had already sent another spell out, though not at him.....at Luna.

“Accio wand!” Luna’s wand flew into his left hand and he trained them both on Flitwick (Bliss thought this might be grounds for disqualification, since it involved another student helping, but one look at Luna and her surprised face ended that train of thought). The use of different wands was something all of them had been working on over the months, and of his friends’ wands, only Neville’s worked better for him (and he didn’t want to use it now and risk damaging it before Neville’s own match).....though perversely, Snape’s wand worked better for him than anyone’s, and he had carried it hidden in his robes during the last Hogsmeade day, just in case. The rules, as explained earlier, were much more relaxed for the teacher duels, and Harry could do this (the main tournament students could not use props or involve other people while fighting). Flitwick was now staring down the barrel of Harry holding two wands. He had had a week to try to figure out how to defeat Harry, and while he had not devoted hours upon hours to the task, had not really come up with any terrific plans, the lad was so fast and magically powerful that simple tricks were not going to do much. He had decided to repeat his Bliss tactics and fight a defensive duel and hope to use some of Harry’s work against him.

That would not happen this day, as Harry had closely watched Flitwick's work with the floor pieces and had no interest in giving the diminutive teacher any ammunition to fire at him. He used his own wand to conjure his most powerful shield (Stupefy would only weaken it, and no other spells that weren't Unforgivables could penetrate it) and slowly advanced on Flitwick, using Luna's wand to fire another series of stunners at him.

"Stupefy!"

"Stupefy!"

"Stupefy!"

Flitwick dodged the first two, but was caught by the third on his left leg (Harry was aiming low again), knocking him down. His own retaliatory spells weren't doing much good either, because of Harry's strong shield, he didn't even need to dodge the stunners. Harry was barely pausing to draw breath as he moved steadily forward and fired shot after shot at his teacher, and only he could tell that the combined power he was putting out from both wands was wearing him down quickly. One thing he had learned from Snape though, was that a lot of people can be fooled by confidence, even when there was little or nothing to back it up.....so he had become very good at hiding his exhaustion, from everyone but Luna, and to a certain extent Ron, Ginny, and Neville.....who were collectively getting tired just watching Harry hammer at his opponent.

Flitwick was fast running out of options, as Harry was quickly cornering him and making him dodge spell after spell. Now if this was a real duel, with someone's life at stake (particularly his own), his tactics would have been a lot different, and he would have summoned everything AND the kitchen sink at Harry to try and knock him down.....well that was a thought.

"Accio table!" he summoned one of the long tables that were stacked on one side and had it go straight for Harry at a pretty decent speed. Harry whipped his head around and:

"Reducto!" which he then immediately followed up with:

“Banisheo!”

The crowd was pretty shocked with the power of the first charm, but even more surprised when Harry sent the pieces flying at Flitwick without most of them even touching the ground. Flitwick managed to put up a solid shield just in time to deflect the major pieces, but a few of the splinters got through and got him on his tiny feet, which caused him to topple over in pain. Harry had not let up, and was sending stunner after stunner, which got Flitwick while he was down, ending the match and nearly putting the wee man into a coma (three hit him). Pomfrey again made her presence known and looked over the professor. After removing the splinters from his feet and waking him up, Flitwick was pronounced ok.

Harry was feeling a bit queasy when he realized the harm that could have been done if Flitwick had not put up the shield quickly enough, he had just reacted on instinct and nothing else. His teacher could see this, and sought to mitigate the feelings.

“You did exceptionally well Harry, that was a nice move at the end. I was expecting the Reducto, but the banishment charm on top of that.....that was very quick thinking and outstanding reflexes.”

“I’m sorry about your feet sir, thank God you put that shield up in time.”

“I was going to do it the moment I decided to send the table at you.....I was just surprised by your amazing speed is all, that was truly breathtaking.” Indeed all of the assembled faculty and other ‘adults’ were in awe as well.....including, but not limited to, a very smug McGonagall, who not only was happy that she was not the only teacher taken to the woodshed by Harry, but her own foresight in putting him on the Gryffindor Quidditch team in his first year, where she felt that a lot of his reflexes developed.....Bliss and Shepherd, who knew now more than ever that they had chosen their side in the Dumbledore/Harry war wisely.....and Fudge, who for the first time (including last week’s duel) fully realized that the boy was not just all hype, there was prime magical talent in there. Harry was no Superman mind you, he had just used his natural power (which in

truth was not much more than Neville's) and quick reflexes.....and quite the desire to stay alive (which meant studying spells and tactics more than he perhaps would have wanted to), which fashioned the Harry that everyone saw duel McGonagall and Flitwick.

Bliss walked back to the middle of the floor to make the final match-up announcement.

"Ron Weasley."

"Neville Longbottom."

The two friends walked on to the dueling area, arms slung casually over each other's shoulders as they stopped in the middle of the floor. On cue, they turned toward Harry and yelled in unison:

"Hail Caesar! We who are about to die, salute you!" The entire room went up in a roar of laughter, as Harry ceremoniously bowed to them, and motioned ostentatiously for them to get going.

"Hurry up you two! I have important things to do!" They bowed back, and took their positions.

"Begin!"

"Stupefy!"

"Stupefy!"

Each of them fired one of them, and each of them hit dead on, the spells were shot out that fast. Both of them slumped down unconscious and the audience, which had been yelling in anticipation.....didn't know what to do, they were now dead silent and confused. Harry's couldn't restrain himself and shouted out:

"Crikey guys, I was kidding!"

The three referees looked at each blankly and wondered what to do. While they were contemplating, Harry hopped the wall and woke Ron

and Neville up. The three teachers walked over and addressed the two teenagers, Bliss was their spokesperson:

"Well guys, we have two options here: one, you can tie and be co-champions, or we can do a re-start, what muggle golfers call a 'mulligan'.....what's your pleasure?" Ron and Neville looked at each other and shrugged.....Ron spoke first.

"I want to give it another go, I want this decided."

"I would rather be second than tie for first like that, let's duel."

This much impressed the professors, and Bliss made the announcement to the crowd, which started cheering again.

"Begin!"

"Stupefy!"

"Spider Bogey!"

Neville dodged out of the way of the stunner, and Ron only let a couple of the spiders get on him before he:

"Incendio!" and burned them off. Neville, though he knew the fire spell was not coming at him, decided to have a little fun and threw a water spray at Ron anyway:

"Poseido!"

This certainly put out the fires that Ron had started, leaving some very soaked spider bodies and a wet enough Ron, who retaliated by using another fire spell aimed directly at the jet of water coming from Neville's wand.

"Incendio!"

Water meets fire, it was a very cool effect, and steam immediately started billowing from the point of contact. This was a weird match in a way, as the two young men had practice dueled with each other at

least three or four dozen times since last September, and since they were partners in invasion defense planning, they knew each others' strengths and weaknesses very well. It was not like fighting against themselves, but there was a sense from each of them that they would have to experiment, somewhat crazily, to gain an upper hand.

Another fog was hanging over the dueling area, this was becoming a pattern wasn't it? Ron quickly scotched that by using the wind charm to blow it right in Neville's face.

"Windario!"

Neville started choking a bit, but it didn't last long enough to do any damage.....except make him vulnerable to the tickling charm that he got hit with next.

"Rictusempra!"

Ron put enough power into it that Neville was doubled over for a moment, after which Ron tripped him up

"Tripper!"

Neville went right to the ground, and while he was feeling no ill effects from his broken leg from a week ago (he was walking by the next day), he was now clearly on the defensive. Ron started whipping out spells at Neville, and was careful to use none that could be sent back to him:

"Rictusempra!"

"Percussio!"

"Poseido!"

All of them hit Neville hard, the percussion hex right in the stomach, and the water spray right on his wand arm, causing the wand to slip out of his grip a little bit. Neville was now down almost for the count, and Ron was savvy enough to realize that one or two more slight pushes were needed. In quick succession he shot out:

“Accio wand!”

“Stupefy!”

He loosed the stunner without even waiting for the wand to come to him, the delay of which is a mistake that a lot of duelers make. The stunner hit Neville dead on, and the match was over.....for real this time.

This was not the match most folks had been expecting, yet again. Ron seemed to save his best for the last two matches, and neither one was near the equal of his duel with Ginny. There was a lot of surprise amongst the spectators that Neville had gone down so quickly, but all it had really taken was for one key moment in the match to present itself: Ron’s use of the steam as an offensive weapon to attack with, not a defensive weapon to simply confuse Neville with and hide behind. That set the tone for the rest of the contest, as Neville was on his heels the rest of the way, and Ron was smart enough to keep him there.

Neville was quickly revived by Bliss, and graciously accepted the cheers given him by all in the Great Hall. He had fought a magnificent tournament and had a lot to be proud of. One look at his grandmother’s face was all the prize he needed though, she had never been prouder of him.....and told him so very loudly, making him blush. Tracey planted a large kiss right on him, and he did not feel at all like a loser.

For their own parts, the faculty had watched Neville compete during the tournament very closely, and had seen the rise in confidence that affected his classroom performance, social skills, and his fighting ability.....and they all agreed that if Harry Potter never did anything else in his lifetime, what he had done for Neville Longbottom would earn him a place in the pantheon of Hogwarts.

Ron too was made much of, and there was a real trophy given to him (by Dumbledore), in addition to the gift certificates (including one from WWW), the House points, and a plaque to be put in the trophy room.....as well as Bliss’ mixing bowl, which is the trophy that Ron

lifted above his head in celebration. This was one of the defining moments of his life, he thought inside. It was right there with meeting Harry on the train, kissing Susan for the first time, and seeing his parents in the kitchen of what was now his house (not all defining moments are good ones). He and Neville gave each other a manly hug, and immediately started dissecting the match, debating on what the other could have done differently.....even as they were each raised to the shoulders of many classmates and paraded around the Great Hall.

There was a huge party that afternoon in Gryffindor Tower, as all of the winning House, and all of their friends, celebrated the end of the tournament and Ron's victory. They skipped dinner that night, which didn't matter much as the House Elves just delivered it, another treat from Dumbledore along with his congratulations. Bill and Ashley left a bit early, they had much to do at The Burrow, and the twins and Charlie soon followed. The students journeyed to the Headmaster's Office at about 9:00 pm and took the floo over to The Burrow, and spent a couple of hours helping to set up what was to be an outdoor wedding. Wizard weddings don't feature rehearsals, and with over thirty people (the students, Weasleys, and Ashley's family just over from the States) set up was completed in no time, leaving plenty of opportunity for swapping stories.....and the Brits all wanted to hear stories about Ashley, so her parents were center stage the rest of the night.....much to the bride-to-be's chagrin. It was a fun night, and ended around 2:00 am with kids and adults sleeping all over the place.

Sunday, March 30th, 1997

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Morning

The wedding of Voldemort and Narcissa was notable only in its normalcy. There were no muggle tortures as part of the festivities, or any squibs roasting over an open fire. The affair was surprisingly girly in a way, as the groom had meant what he said when he told his bride that she could have the wedding she wanted. The entire contingent of Death Eaters were in attendance, and the outpouring of

gifts was incredible, everyone seemed to be competing to see who could give the most lavish presents. Narcissa had resisted temptation and not sent out mock invitations to Fudge, Dumbledore, and Potter, she had a smart moment and thought that it might not be a good idea for the other side to find out that there could be a real Voldemort Jr. being possible in the near future.

Draco gave his mother away, and Percy performed the service, as he was 'officially' representing the Ministry, and was going to slip the marriage license surreptitiously into the files the next day. Narcissa was every bit the blushing bride, and it was quite the trip for those in attendance to see their Lord and Master in the finest dress robes. Neither of them had any illusions of what they were getting: Narcissa was not in love, and knew that she was nothing more than a baby incubator with good bloodlines (who was not borderline insane like her sister), but she was thinking only in the short term right now, and was dreaming of power. Voldemort, for his part, could have done without all of the marriage stuff and would rather just impregnate her and go about his business, but Pettigrew had convinced him that it would be a good idea for everything to be nice and legitimate, for when he took over as Emperor of Great Britain. He was every bit the genial host this day, and it was a lovely ceremony.....in a manner. No one cried, it was not that kind of lovely, but every one of the guests in attendance left the ceremony and reception more convinced than ever that they were on the right side, with the best leader, and would win.

### The Burrow

### Noon

The Weasley wedding was not much different in its atmosphere, only in its company. Wizard weddings were in substance, no different from their muggle counterparts, they just did not incorporate religion into the service. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, performed the ceremony, and the entire Order of the Phoenix and more than half of the Wizengamot, as well as Fortrap and what appeared to be the entire goblin membership of the Board of Directors at Gringotts, were in attendance to watch the head of the House of Weasley get married (and about time too, many of the older

witches were thinking, Bill being twenty-nine already). Ashley looked beautiful as her father, Jonathon, walked her up the aisle, where Bill was waiting with a smile so big that it should be illegal. Ashley stood next to her cousin Carrie, her maid of honor, while Bill was parked next to Charlie, the best man. Fudge delivered the words, ending with:

“William Prewett Weasley, do you take Ashley Katherine Reynolds to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?” Bill had never wanted to say yes more to anything in his life.

“I do.”

“Ashley Katherine Reynolds, do you take William Prewett Weasley to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?” She smiled softly at her man, and thanked every God she could think of that she had allowed Gringotts to transfer her overseas (she was twenty-six and an eight year employee of the bank).

“I do.”

They exchanged rings, and Fudge laid on the coup de grace:

“By the power invested in me as the Minister of Magic, I now pronounce you husband and wife, you may kiss the bride.”

And did he ever, Bill planted a long one on his wife that seemed to last forever. When he stopped there were giggles from some of the onlookers:

“Hey, it was my first kiss as a married man, I wanted to make it a memorable one.” Everyone smiled, and pictures (not from Colin) were taken in mass quantities. The ceremony merged with the reception as Winky and Dobby quickly set up tables and the food began not ten minutes after the kiss ended.

There was much chatting and reminiscing.....and every guest was thinking (or saying out loud in some cases) how much Molly and Arthur would have loved this. They had quite taken to Ashley from the beginning, and knew how happy she made their son. For the vast majority of them, it was their first visit to The Burrow since the killings, and it was very strange not to see them here, at the first wedding of one of their children. When one older witch commented on how long it took Bill to make it to the altar, he had one simple, beautiful reply to it:

"Look at what I gained by waiting.....I got Ashley." The girls who overheard that got dreamy looks on their faces, and even the boys got a bit sentimental. Charlie was next in line, age-wise, but he did not currently have a girlfriend.....though he and Katie Bell, who was also single, spent a lot of time together at the reception. Fred and George, who did have girlfriends (Alicia and Angelina respectively) were not thought of to be the marrying types, just yet anyway, but the ceremony and all the good feeling attached to it started making them ponder. For Harry and the rest of the Hogwarts contingent, it was a reminder of what good was to come after Voldemort was defeated.

After awhile, Harry was interrupted in his conversation with Carrie Simon (the maid of honor) and her husband Richard, by a discreet cough. It was Fortrap, and he had someone he wanted to introduce Harry to. Excusing himself, they walked over to another goblin, who was being quizzed by Ginny and Anthony about all things Gringotts, though they did not know exactly who he was.

"Harry, I would like you to be Traimax, he is the CEO of Gringotts Corporation. Traimax, this is Harry Potter." The two shook hands

"Pleased to meet you sir, are you having a good time?"

"Yes I am, thank you Harry, and it's a pleasure to finally meet you. To hear Fortrap sing your praises you might as well have goblin blood in you somewhere." Harry started laughing at the thought of that, and it was nice to get a compliment from a goblin, as they gave them sparingly to humans.

"That's nice to hear sir, and I return them equally to him. I'll be forever grateful to Bill for asking Fortrap to manage my account, I doubt anyone could have done better by me."

"Bill is a fine man, he has a bright future with us if he keeps his standards up to where they are now. Already he is the fourth highest ranking human in the company, and rising fast." Harry had no real idea what Bill did in his day job, as Bill was under a secrecy charm that would not allow him to give details about it (which is where he got the idea for the advanced parchment), but he was impressed nonetheless.

"We should get together sometime soon Harry, perhaps this summer, there are some things to discuss. You could have quite the future with the bank if you would like to." Work for Gringotts? The thought had never crossed his mind really, he would have thought that Arithmancy (something he never remotely considered taking as an elective) would be required, and said so, making both Fortrap and Traimax laugh.

"Not at all, though it is a useful subject. No Harry, all we want are smart and talented wizards. I know that you will have your pick of careers, and that money is not a motivating factor for you.....but we can offer you very interesting work, with no pigheaded politicians to worry about, Gringotts being a law amongst ourselves. Think about it, and we'll chat come summer." He shook Harry's hand again, and moved off into the crowd so that he could torment Fudge and Bones some (Traimax's favorite sport if he was to be candid about it). Harry and Fortrap talked electronics for a few minutes, as the launch was due to happen within the month. They ended with Fortrap's parting words:

"You made an excellent impression on Traimax Harry, he usually doesn't offer jobs to kids he's just met."

"All I did was be polite really."

"That certainly helped, but you have a good reputation among us Harry, it will benefit you before too long."

And it did, it would go on to make quite a difference in events to come.

Author's Note: Something was brought up by a new reader, who while reviewing Chapter 3 (I think), took offense on my use of the word "seizure", when I had Harry ask Dobby not to appear in front of the Dursleys otherwise they would have seizures (or something like that). He/She thought I was referring to an epileptic seizure, and mentioned that their brother has epilepsy and that they did not appreciate the reference. I apologize if it got taken that way, what I in fact meant to imply was a heart seizure/attack. No insult or insensitivity was intended I assure you. I prefer to offend Hermione and Dumbledore lovers only. Speaking of Dumbledore, I finally set eyes on the book cover for HBP, the one that has Harry and he together. I've had a few reviews say that I should change my anti-Dumbledore plots to reflect this. My answer? No. The plots will stay as they are unless I change them for some other reason, this was never intended to be my own version of HBP, just my ideal sixth year story.

Tuesday, April 1st, 1997

Office Wing, Hogwarts

8:00 pm

Harry walked into Bliss' office for his weekly tutoring session in Defense. He and Biller were now basically just using the Auror training manuals and going through them chapter by chapter. Travis had told Harry that if he wanted to do Auror training after Hogwarts, it was looking more and more like he would only have to do the two year minimum, since the tests and trials would likely not be too much of a challenge for him. Biller had been careful not to have any one on one duels with his young friend, part of him did not want to find out the result, but they went over tactics and spells on a very in-depth level.

Tonight Biller was not alone in the office however, Fudge was sitting there as well, drinking some tea and chatting with Biller and Bliss. She excused herself, and went off in the floo to do her work in Shepherd's office down in the dungeons.

"Hello Harry, how are you this evening? I hope you don't mind me hijacking part of your tutoring time. We have a few things to discuss."

"I don't mind at all Minister, I have a couple things I've been meaning to talk with you about as well."

"Good.....now first things first, the werewolf legislation. I'm sorry that it has taken so long to prepare, and I know I should have rammed it through after Remus Lupin was killed.....but there were other factors in play as you are well aware. Plus, we wanted to let the Wolfsbane Trust gain some momentum and see how it worked. I understand that quite a few have come forward?"

"Yes sir, we have had forty-three come to claim the potion as of two weeks ago.....under strict guarantee of anonymity of course. The Potions Masters we have chosen have made their quotas and as far as we know, all of the potions have worked perfectly."

"Good, I would like you and Peter Tyson to select one of the Potions Masters to come and testify to that effect at the Wizengamot. The hearing will take place one week from Thursday, on the 10th I believe it is. If you like, you may use Charles Shepherd to do it. His popularity among the students has gotten out, and his scholarly credentials, even for someone as young as he is, are impeccable. I think he would play well, but if you have another you would prefer....."

"Well I haven't met any of the others, they deal with Peter since I'm here all year.....but I'll talk to him and go along with his decision. Will I have to testify?"

"Yes you will.....we 'have to' is not quite accurate, as in you won't be compelled to by law.....but the repeal has no chance whatsoever if you don't do it. I'll also be calling a couple of former students to talk about Lupin's teaching during his year at Hogwarts, and I will do some talking myself about why I wanted the anti-werewolf legislation in the first place, and why I'm changing my tune now."

"I take it you will have a good explanation for changing?"

“I won’t bring up our deal, if that’s what you are asking, though most people will assume that you had a lot to do with it.”

“What are the chances for a repeal?”

“We need two-thirds of the body to vote to repeal, that’s twenty-seven votes. Right now Voldemort controls ten of the members (Andrew Baroody, a Voldemort sympathizer whom Arthur was going to replace, had retired in January as planned, a Fudge loyalist taking his place), and they will certainly vote to uphold the laws. That leaves thirty votes, and we can only lose three of them if we want to succeed. I have talked about this with Dumbledore, and he has assured me that he is fully with us in this matter, so that gives us twenty-one votes right there: eight that are his people, thirteen that are mine. That leaves nine swing votes that aren’t in any camp right now. Two of them are Philip Greengrass and Manuel Zabini, who told me privately that they would go along with what you want here. So we need four of the other seven, and they are hard to call.”

“How hard did you have to push your people to sign off on this?”

“I can tell you right now that it would have been nearly impossible without the Wolfsbane Trust. Your friend dying could not have been a greater service to his fellow werewolves in retrospect. I understand you knew nothing of the trust beforehand?”

“No I didn’t, I found out at the will reading along with everyone else. Would it help if I wrote letters to the swing votes? Some kind of personal appeal might do some good.”

“I think that is a very good idea Harry, hang on a second.” He took a piece of parchment from Bliss’ desk and wrote some names down, and handed it to Harry.

“Don’t go too over the top with it, a simple, short, but heartfelt appeal. Have your friend Luna help you with it, I understand she’s quite a talented writer.” Harry used all his self-control to keep the grin off his face as he started thinking about goblin pies again.

“She helped me a lot with the speech I gave at our press conference.”

"I know, I could tell that a Lovegood had a hand in it.....and that's a compliment by the way, some of Joe's stuff is quite amusing. Now I'm assuming that want an update on Percy."

"Yes sir, is there anything new?"

"Percy is by all accounts doing a competent job in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. His obvious disdain for his post is counterbalanced by his zeal in enforcing Ministry law. He's brought more people up on charges in the last three months than Arthur did all last year. Perkins can't stand him, but then again he never really could. I think the poor Warlock is hoping beyond hope that Ron or Ginny joins the office so that he'll have a proper Weasley around. Anyway, Percy's outside behavior continues to give us little reason for worry, other than him being much more careful in his movements, and scanning himself for tracking charms many times during the day.....which is why we have not put any on him. I'm not really sure anyone would have noticed some of this if not for the rumors we heard, and there have been no new developments on that front."

"Is that why you haven't done any formal questioning yet?"

"For the most part, yes. Percy is behaving much as someone who is afraid for his life, and it can be construed that he is just being cautious.....as well he should be. If he is innocent, as I tend to think he is, I'm sure he thinks that Voldemort would want him dead just because he is a Weasley.....and that his brothers might want to harm, though not kill, him because they see him as a traitor to his family. Unless something new comes in, I think the situation will have to stay as it is, I cannot afford to alienate our workforce with mass questioning." Harry thought on this for a moment, and badly wanted to agree with Fudge that Percy was essentially harmless.....except he didn't. This was not the time to be openly disagreeing with the man though, since what he had to ask for next was rather touchy.

"Minister, there is something I would like to ask of you, and it's rather delicate, but extremely necessary."

"Ask away Harry, what is it that you need."

"I want official Ministry permission to use Avada Kedavra to defend myself, and to use against Voldemort when the time comes." Fudge had long been expecting this, and was fairly surprised that the lad had waited this long.

"You think Avada Kedavra will work on Voldemort? I thought this 'power he knows not' business was supposed to take care of him." Harry betrayed no surprise that Fudge knew the Prophecy, as he felt none. Surely Fletcher or someone else would have told him.

"I'm not sure how much I believe the Prophecy sir, and I need every weapon at my disposal.....and I would prefer not to be arrested afterward."

"I agree with you, on both counts. I'm not sure that I trust some incompetent Divination teacher either, but how do you account for Dumbledore's complete faith in it? I mean the man has gone to so much trouble over the years because of it, both in regards to you and me."

"I can't sir, and that's what worries me the most about it, his total certainty." Biller took this opportunity to make his first contribution to the conversation.

"Harry, I think you should tell the Minister your feelings about Dumbledore and what he might be up for after the war." Harry agreed and told Fudge of his suspicions that Dumbledore was setting him up to be the next Dark Lord for after the war.

"That's another reason I want permission to use Avada Kedavra, just in case I might need it against Dumbledore." Fudge thought on this for a moment.

"Just out of curiosity, and I don't want any more details than necessary.....but who wound up killing Snape, and how?" Harry knew that this was no setup, he and Bill both had pensieve memories that would show Fudge giving them permission.

"I did, with a Reducto to the heart from six inches away." So no Unforgivables, that was a relief.....they could have used Snape's wand after all.

"And the old man doesn't know this? Officially I mean."

"He officially knows the story we spun to the Daily Prophet, but like the rest of the Order he doesn't believe it. The only ones who weren't there that night who do know the real story are you and Travis."

"Well let's keep it that way certainly. All right, I agree that use of Avada Kedavra is something you might need in your quiver at some point, so I will draft a parchment tomorrow giving you permission to use it if you feel the need.....and I'm willing to include Neville Longbottom and Ron and Bill Weasley in that as well, and those three only. But keep this in mind Harry, for all four of you.....if you do use that curse, you had better be able to defend its use in front of an inquiry. I'm assuming that you are practicing with Snape's old wand?" This rather caught Harry by surprise, and it showed.

"Come now Harry, he does not need it anymore, and I'm assuming one of you kept it as a souvenir if nothing else."

"I'm better with my wand, but his works for me better than anyone else's."

"Good, Voldemort might not expect an attack that way, and you showed last week that you're pretty good with two wands at the same time. Now I will take my leave and let you two get on with your training for the night. I'll have that permission parchment to you tomorrow, and I'll let you know through the old man what time you need to be at the Ministry next week to testify." He got up and shook hands with Harry.

"Thank you sir, see you next week.....wait, I have one more question, more of a curiosity than anything, and I assume this is something you would know or have access to."

"You've got me intrigued Harry, what would you like to know?"

"What House was Dumbledore in when he was a student? I looked in the trophy room, but all references to what House he was in were removed from the plaques and trophies." Fudge started laughing when he heard that.

"Five galleons gets you into the pool Harry, no one knows. I've vowed one day to put him under Veritaserum to find out, but I haven't gotten around to it yet. What's your guess?" Harry took out five galleons and handed it over.

"I'm saying Slytherin, but that's just a shot in the dark, he could be any of them really."

"My guess was Hufflepuff, which was my old House in case no one told you. I'll add your name to the list, there is over 1,000 galleons in it by now, the winners will divide it up if we ever find out." He bade them goodnight again, and flooed back to his office at the Ministry.

Harry and Biller then went out to the Forbidden Forest, where they practiced movement exercises.....and Harry was becoming quite good at moving both quickly and silently through the forest.....so much so that they encountered no centaurs during the hour that they were out there, though that might be because the centaurs did not want to be discovered or show themselves, one never knows.

Ron and Neville took the news the next day with some satisfaction, but did not look eager to use their new found permission parchment. They both vowed to use Reducto as their main curse in any case, and hoped that the words Avada Kedavra never passed their lips. The three of them kept the news of this from the others, as they didn't want Ginny wondering where her permission parchment was (Luna would never dream of using the curse, permission or not). Harry had wondered why those two weren't included, or Fred and George too, but he was happy enough to get it for himself and the other three that he didn't dare try for more. He knew that one reason Fudge liked him was because he asked for relatively little, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Thursday, April 10th, 1997

The anti-werewolf legislation was repealed by a vote of 29-11, though the debate was drawn out by the dissenters, all of whom wanted a lengthy speech on the official record opposing the repeal.....for the benefit of a certain evil wizard one would think. After his talk with Fudge, Harry spent the entire next night composing personal letters to each of the seven swing votes, and one night later he snuck out of Hogwarts and had a meeting with Manuel Zabini and Philip Greengrass, asking them in person for their votes. His personal entreaties worked on all of the swing votes, though one of Dumbledore's supporters switched sides for this one issue.

Charles Shepherd was a confident witness during his testimony, as he took everyone through the basics of Wolfsbane and what the direct benefits and the side effects were. He was questioned rigorously by both sides, but Fudge had been right: his credentials were good enough that he passed with flying colors.....and being a Slytherin from a family of Slytherins did not hurt him either, since Slytherins were traditionally thought to be against magical creatures or humans with 'problems'. Harry testified as well, and told of his three year friendship with Remus Lupin, who was held up throughout the entire process as the example by which the Wolfsbane Potion could benefit werewolves. Fudge had been dead on in one comment he made to Harry: a number of members who supported the repeal said that they were only doing so because of the Wolfsbane Trust.

Afterward, Peter predicted that a lot more werewolves would come forward to get their dose each month, now that there was some tangible benefit to them, and not just feeling better during the transformations. He would prove to be correct, as over the next two months the number of werewolves accessing the Trust would increase by over sixty percent.....and not one had failed their initial Veritaserum test.

Thursday, April 17th, 1997

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Mid-afternoon

Crabbe and Goyle, the next generation, were ushered into Voldemort's study. Pettigrew was also there, this had been his brainchild, to use these two to test out a few things. Voldemort had a wand in each hand, his in his right, and Pettigrew's in his own natural hand, his left. He aimed the wands at each goon and yelled out a powerful:

"Imperio!"

Both Goyle and Crabbe assumed expressions that were even more blank than usual as they sat there and awaited their orders.

"Listen closely you two, as I will not repeat myself. Two weeks from today, you will kill Harry Potter. You will enter Hogwarts, under the cover of Invisibility cloaks that we will provide you, via the Hogsmeade passageway through Honeydukes. Once inside the castle, you will ignore whatever alarms are going off and proceed directly to the Great Hall during lunchtime. Once there you will remove your cloaks and each hit Potter with Avada Kedavra at close range. In your other hands you will have your portkeys ready and activate them after you kill him. Am I understood?"

"Yes Master." This said in unison.

"Between now and then, you will practice using Avada Kedavra as much as possible. You will be provided with all the test subjects that you need, both squib and muggle. During this practice you will rehearse drawing your wands quickly, and then using the portkeys quickly. Your first practice will be this time tomorrow. Do either of you have any questions?" Surprisingly Crabbe had one.

"What if the curse doesn't work Master? Will Avada Kedavra kill Potter?" That was the million galleon question wasn't it?

"That is what you are going in there to find out Crabbe. If your reaction times are what they should be, we will have two free shots at Potter to test this out, without losing either of you to capture."

"We will make you proud Master."

"I know you will boys, now go back to the library and study."

The two teenagers left and Voldemort and Pettigrew looked at each other for a moment. This was Pettigrew's idea and the two of them had gone back and forth on it for a few days, kicking it's proverbial tires. Wormtail had brought it up as more of an offhand notion than anything else, an offshoot of a long talked about idea to send Draco in to do the same thing.....but Voldemort's promise to Narcissa negated that.....one might wonder what could hold the Dark Lord to keep any promise, but a pregnant (or potentially pregnant) woman has all the power in the world over her mate, especially when he badly wants the child.

"The day before those two fools go in there, send someone to make sure that the passageway isn't sealed like the one from the Shrieking Shack.....don't go yourself, just send someone reliable."

"Yes my Lord.....and I'll have their memories modified beforehand as well. I wonder if we shouldn't send someone else in there with them, with an eye toward taking out Dumbledore at the same time." While the idea of Dumbledore being dead was obviously a pleasant one.....

"No, we need the old coot in there to bother Potter, just in case this does not work. I agree that he would go down more easily than the kid would, but the psychological impact he has outweighs the magical as far as I'm concerned. There will be plenty of time to get him during the invasion, or in the aftermath after they've officially booted his ass out of there."

"I keep wondering back to Crabbe's question.....what if Avada Kedavra cannot kill that kid?"

"I have a backup plan if that happens, though it is one that I will keep to myself for the time being. What do you have Nott and Jugson working on right now?" Nott and Jugson were arguably the smartest of the senior Death Eaters, other than Pettigrew himself (seventh in his class at Hogwarts, right behind Evans, Potter, Lupin, Snape, Black, and Longbottom, and ahead of Alice Lee, the future Mrs. Longbottom).....though smart is a relative term for this bunch

(Voldemort himself was light years ahead of all of them, as he had been one of the most gifted students in Hogwarts history, combining the best parts of Granger, Potter, and Turpin).

“Nothing too important really, just tutoring the new people, and beating the bushes for a new Potions Master. What do you need them to do?”

“I’ve put off finding out about any possible connections between myself and Potter, family-wise, for too long now. I want those two to do it personally, have them check muggle records as well as Ministry records.”

“Well the Ministry records part of that will cause the problems, all portals entering the Ministry are strictly guarded at all times.”

“What about Percy’s office? They could get in through there couldn’t they? That office must be low level enough that they won’t have a guard on it.” Pettigrew thought that his Master was clutching at straws a bit here, which meant that he really wanted this plan. He felt that it was begging for trouble, risking Percy’s cover solely for the sake of some genealogical research (while he wondered if the Ministry had caught on to Percy, he had no idea of their full on suspicions of him).....but some arguments are not worth the effort, even if Voldemort allowed him to actually play devil’s advocate.

“I will have Jugson and Nott begin first thing tomorrow morning my Lord. I will have them submit daily reports.”

“Good.....I know you think this a waste of time Wormtail, and wisely you refrained from saying as much.....but if Potter truly cannot be killed by Avada Kedavra, we need to know as much about him as possible.”

“Yes Master, if anything is out there, those two will dig it up, Nott’s son lives in the library from what Draco tells me, his father is the same way.” They spent the next while discussing the next round of planned squib killings, and Pettigrew somehow managed not to ask if the new Mrs. Riddle was pregnant.....though he badly wanted to.

Crabbe and Goyle thinned out the squib population by another thirty-five over the next two weeks, and they got very good at doing Avada Kedavra from different ranges as well, in case Potter was not right there in front of them. They also killed twenty random muggles as well, mostly homeless people that no one would miss. Draco made sure to get a few curses in, he didn't want his two goons to get better at killing than he did.....though he was still not aware of how fragile his standing was in the Death Eaters, and with his Master.

It turned out that Jugson and Nott did not need to use Percy's office after all, they used an old portkey that Magdalena Edgecombe had supplied Pettigrew, one that he found in his desk drawer at Riddle Manor, but had forgotten about for months afterward. The key took them right into the Ministry, where they waited under Invisibility Cloaks (the same ones Crabbe and Goyle were to use) until the day shift was done. They spent all night rifling through the records, but could find nothing connecting their Lord and Potter beyond what they already knew. By month's end they were still doing their muggle research, with several promising leads.

Saturday, April 19th, 1997

Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch

2:00 pm

"Welcome everyone to the penultimate Quidditch game of the season, Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff! The winner of this game is guaranteed second place in the overall Quidditch standings, and will still have a chance for the overall title. The teams each stand at 1-1, with each having a victory over Slytherin and a defeat to Gryffindor." He introduced the team members, who were no different from their last matches (indeed Ravenclaw had not changed a person yet this season, though Cho had to be talked out of replacing Michael). Cho and Justin shook hands stiffly at mid-field, and Madam Hooch gave her spiel and released the balls into the air.

The crowd was not really for one side or the other, mostly they were just cheering when anything positive happened. Said crowd also included scouts from all thirteen professional Quidditch teams, more

to get their idea of the choices for the exhibition match than to scout for the coming draft (Cho Chang and Ravenclaw Beater Clive Lucas were the only seventh year students in the game, and neither was considered a future star professional). Harry had a banner for each team in his hands was waving them, playing the student diplomat role to the hilt. Ginny was all for Ravenclaw and her Chaser boyfriend, and her voice could be loudly heard cheering him on.

The Snitch, as was its habit this season so far, declined to make an appearance for the first fifteen minutes as the Chasers were in rare form, scoring goals right and left. Orla Quirke, the only Ravenclaw star of the Gryffindor game, having scored both their goals, went wild on Justin. She scored eight goals in the first fifteen minutes, and played great defense as well, stripping poor Ernie MacMillan three times in that span, leading to her fast break style goals. Her Hufflepuff counterpart, Laura Madley, did likewise, scoring five goals of her own in that time. Madley, a fourth year like her opponent Quirke, had been the chief beneficiary of Justin's 'run up the score against the Dark Slytherins' strategy, scoring twenty-seven goals in the rout to become the season's leading scorer so far. The Beaters were very energetic, sending bludgers at the Chasers right and left, but nothing was connecting, and no one got hurt. At the fifteen minute mark, the score was 110-90 for Ravenclaw.

Ron, who was not really rooting for any team in particular (even with a Hufflepuff girlfriend), was gleeful as he saw the offensive display being thrown at Justin and Stephen Cornfoot, no one cheered goals louder than he did. He knew that a shutout next week was more than possible, and he really wanted to be in the exhibition game. Likewise Ginny and Natalie were not happy seeing all the goals, as they knew that their only hope of matching those totals was if Katie decreed a run up the score against Slytherin. Harry was closely watching Cho and Megan, who were in the usual position of Megan barely moving as she scanned the sky, and Cho watching Megan.

After a timeout by Justin to redirect the Hufflepuff strategy, they were back in the air, and bludger after bludger was sent toward Cho Chang, who had been minding her own business up in the air when she was suddenly fleeing for her life. Justin had wisely decided that the chasers were even enough that no team was going to get to be 150

points ahead, and thus whomever got the Snitch first would win. Therefore he figured that the busier Cho was fending off bludgers, the less she could look for the Snitch. The Ravenclaw beaters had no choice but to follow a similar track, and Megan Jones was soon flying around much more than she would have been otherwise. Cho was not a brilliant strategist as Captain, but with the only team coming back from last season with all its players, she did not need to be usually.....over the last two seasons she generally just reacted to what the other Captain did, be it Justin, Katie, Angelina, or Malfoy. This was no different, and today Orla Quirke was making her look very good, even if Cho was too busy dodging bludgers to properly appreciate it. Over the next twenty minutes Orla scored another eleven goals, outscoring Hufflepuff by a goal all by herself. Liz Mullane and Anthony, the other Chasers, were scoring a few goals too, and the margin was approaching the overflow point (150) before Megan saw the Snitch hovering near Stephen. She tore off after it with Cho following closely behind. Cho was the better overall flyer and was gaining fast, it was Megan's instincts and great vision that allowed her always to see the Snitch first.

The two girls were almost neck and neck when Cho got alongside Megan and brutally shoved her away.....which earned both a foul call and a bludger to the leg, struck by her ex-boyfriend, who was aiming for Megan and would have achieved the same result on her if Cho hadn't fouled. Cho was tougher than she looked, but her right thighbone (femur?) was broken and it caused her to slow way down. Megan recovered quickly and grabbed the Snitch.....which tied the score at 380-380.....but wait a second. Cho's foul on Megan demanded a penalty shot didn't it? Madam Hooch brought the captains to the ground for a brief meeting, and made her announcement.

"The match is currently tied, but Miss Chang committed a foul on Miss Jones right before the Snitch was grabbed. The foul was properly announced, but was not in time to stop play before the Snitch was taken. Therefore a penalty shot is to be awarded to Hufflepuff. Miss Madley will take her shot against Mr. Cornfoot, if she is successful, Hufflepuff wins the game, if not there will be a tie.....which would automatically give Gryffindor the Quiddtich Cup, since their record would be better than either teams' even if they were

to lose next week. Miss Madley, Mr. Cornfoot, please take your positions."

Gryffindor abandoned their neutrality, and as one began urging Cornfoot to block the shot, as it would give them the Cup, joined by the eliminated whatever happened Ravenclaws, who certainly did not want to lose the game, and the Slytherins, who just didn't like Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff did their level best to drown them all out as they screamed for Laura Madley to make her shot. The two of them got to their places and waited for the whistle. Hooch gave her signal and Madley rocked back and forth and launched her shot at the far right goal hoop, while Cornfoot guessed wrong and dove the other way.....though the Quaffle barely made it in, grazing the side of the hoop, but it did score.....Hufflepuff winning the game 390-380.

The Hufflepuffs in the stands went crazy, they might not have nearly the dueling talent that Ravenclaw had, but they were a better Quidditch team this year. Megan Jones was the heroine yet again, the first Seeker since Charlie Weasley to grab the Snitch in every match, something even Harry had not done (though to be fair, he had only completed one entire season as a Seeker, and lost the Snitch in that one due to dozens of Dementors). She rode their shoulders as they chanted "All Star! All Star!" which no doubt meant that they felt she should be on the exhibition team. Hufflepuff now had 1050 points, and all they needed was a Gryffindor loss to claim the Cup.....in order to win on a tiebreaker Gryffindor would need to score 630 points and lose 640-630.....and Ron was not likely to give up that many goals to a professional team in a four hour match, let alone to the ragtag bunch that Slytherin would throw out there.

Ravenclaw took the loss in their usual academic spirit. They had thought it highly unlikely in the first place that Gryffindor would lose to Slytherin, and second place and third place were really no different. Their standing in the overall House Cup race was a beyond solid second, and then only because of Ron's win and the saving of Hermione that put Gryffindor 410 points in the lead. The Cho Chang era in Ravenclaw Quidditch was now over, and over three years had been just as average as John Terry had said. She still held out hope for a professional career, and could be seen talking with several of the scouts after the game. John Terry was there as well, having a

quick word with Megan Jones, who with one year to go was now rising up the draft list for 1998.

Saturday, April 26th, 1997

"Welcome everyone to the final Quidditch game of the season, which will decide the championship of the Quidditch Cup! Coming out first is Slytherin! Their Captain and Keeper is Tony Caldwell, Seeker Michelle Ganoff, Beaters Millicent Bulstrode and Jason Teague, and Chasers Ramsey Porter, Titus Welliver, and John Savage!" Bulstrode and Ganoff (a seventh year) had been the first Slytherin girls to play Quidditch in decades when they had taken on Hufflepuff last month. They were on the team for one simple reason: the pro-Darks only had five boys left, and Quidditch suits up seven. Teague, Welliver, and Savage were the fifth year boys who had not gone to Durmstrang, and Porter had scored the one goal of the Hufflepuff match, on a penalty shot. Caldwell had privately told Theo to begin assembling a team for next year, as he and Porter would be gone, and the other five were not athletes in any sense.....but that they would finish out the year, none of them having played against Ravenclaw in November. One might wonder why Caldwell was so conciliatory, given his pro-Voldemort views.....and Theo flat out asked him as much.

"Theo, I'm the only boy in my generation and I'll inherit everything if I toe the line. My father is foursquare for Voldemort and might even have a Dark Mark for all I know and care. I'm not mucking that up, not for the sake of some silly principle. All I have to do is stay out of things and I can't lose. I won't take the Mark myself mind you.....but I won't risk my life for the Dark Lord or for Potter, I don't believe in either of them enough to bother with that."

"And here we the two-time defending champion Gryffindor! Captain and Chaser Katie Bell, with fellow Chasers Ginny Weasley and Natalie McDonald! Beaters Jack Sloper and Seamus Finnegan! Keeper Ron Weasley, and Seeker Harry Potter! A victory by Gryffindor wins them the Quidditch Cup, while a victory by Slytherin wins the cup for Hufflepuff."

Isn't that a quandary for any self respecting Slytherin? Beat Gryffindor to convey glory to Hufflepuff? Poor Salazar Slytherin would turn over in his grave. The crowd was split somewhat. The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors were of course rooting the same way.....and the Hufflepuffs would have nothing to cheer about once the game started, and could not bring themselves to say anything nice about the particular Slytherins that were out there. Blaise and his people again did not show up, leaving five students in the Slytherin part of the stands: Pansy, and the four remaining seventh year girls, who did their Sonorus best to root their compatriots on. The scouts were back in full force, watching every Gryffindor player, all of whom were viable candidates for the team.....even Ginny and Jack had played very well on the year (Jack having been stung badly by not playing in November, and rededicating himself to training).

To say that the game was a rout would not do it justice. Ron wanted a shutout in the worst way, and got one, as Katie had urged everyone not to even come close to fouling.....though the same could not be said for Slytherin, as they had some pent up hostility to let loose. Their Chasers wound up allowing the Gryffindors seventeen penalty shots due to their rough play, and all of them were converted. It got so bad that at the twenty minute mark, during a timeout (the score was 230-0), Katie had words with Tony:

"What the hell is going on here? Are your miserable excuses for Chasers trying to injure my people? And why? Aren't you guys hated enough?" Caldwell had no sympathy for his counterpart, having had twenty-three goals scored on him in such a short time.

"I didn't tell them to do that stuff Bell, they're just taking out some of their frustrations. You people have to learn to defend yourselves better, and dodge some more."

"Fine, you give me no choice then.....prepare for a long match. The mercy rule is 500 points, and we might just see it.....I would have ended it quickly otherwise." She told Harry to do nothing but prevent Ganoff from getting the Snitch until it was 450-0, then he could start looking. She said this loudly enough that all the Slytherins could hear it, not that she minded.

Jack and Seamus, who had been trying to unseat Bulstrode for the first part of the match (hitting her four times with bludger shots, but she was so large and tough that she stayed on her broom, though her effectiveness at her position was almost nil), turned their attention to the Slytherin Chasers, and soon had all three flinching every time they heard a noise. Harry pulled a Cho and marked Ganoff for another fifteen minutes (and seven more penalty shots) before the score was at the threshold that he wanted. The trick then was to find the darn Snitch, which decided to keep them out there for a few more minutes before showing its face near Ron. Harry blasted off after it, Ganoff not even bothering to follow him. He grabbed it somewhat easily and the game was over.....640-0, the largest possible margin for a Hogwarts Quidditch game (the mercy rule stopping a match when the other team had a lead of 500 points, but Snitch points were allowed to be added). Katie wound up with seventeen goals scored, with Natalie contributing eighteen and Ginny tallying fourteen.....and Ron only had to face one shot on goal, from Porter in minute seven, which he easily caught.

The final Quidditch standings:

Gryffindor: 3-0.....1060 points scored

Hufflepuff: 2-1.....1050 points scored

Ravenclaw: 1-2.....710 points scored

Slytherin: 0-3.....50 points scored

Due to catching one fewer Snitch, Gryffindor wound up scoring the most goals (76 to 60 to 56 to 5, in team standing order), and giving up the fewest as well (7 for Ron, 31 for Stephen, 46 for Justin, 16 for Theo in his game, and 80 by Tony). The high scorer of the season was Orla Quirke, with Katie and Laura Madley right behind her. The competition for the exhibition spots would be very interesting.

The party that night in Gryffindor Tower was wild and woolly, with dancing all over the place. This was the third Quidditch Cup for Katie and Harry, in their five seasons together (giving credit to Harry for last season's, since he did catch one Snitch and win a game), and easily

the one that was the least hassle. No Dementors, no suspensions, no controversy.....just three clean victories. Katie had not had the high profile school Quidditch career of Angelina Johnson, and would not be drafted as high (though she may have moved into the first round perhaps).....but this was very sweet for her. Ironically, she probably would have been Seeker if McGonagall had not 'discovered' Harry, the other potential candidates had been so bad that Wood had told her to start thinking about playing that position.

Five of them would be back for another go: Harry, Ron, Ginny, Seamus, and Natalie, with Michael Leach having had a game's experience as well. Harry and Ron, teammates in so many ways for the last six years, would have one more chance to etch their names in the Hogwarts a History.

Tuesday, April 29th, 1997

In the realm of Hogwarts social gossip, few topics had been hotter over the last month than who Cho would go after next, if in fact she decided to go after anyone in Hogwarts. As stated before, the smart money had Ron or Harry being the target, but in fact neither of them got much of a glance from her.....though that was more from Cho not wanting to deal with the very likely wrath of Ginny, who had floated her own not so veiled threats through the gossip grapevine. Harry, who had missed out on the gambling in the dueling tournament and needing some more amusement, got his licks in here by starting a pool going over who would be her first target, and her ultimate catch. He mostly did it during History of Magic and Herbology, and had collected over 100 galleons approaching the end of the month.....and then Cho struck, apparently.

Her target? One Professor Charles Xavier Shepherd, Potions Master, scion of a wealthy family, and twenty-seven years old this past Februrary. Shepherd was not the best looking guy, about average really (though he was not pasty like Snape), but seemed like he might be fun and was, as mentioned, quite rich. So while there was some surprise over her choice, there wasn't as much as there could have been. Cho mounted her campaign by flirting with him every chance she got, always staying behind after class to talk with him, even making a point of saying hello to him at all meals. What was the

shocker here was that he seemed, if not to be encouraging it, at least not trying to get rid of her in any way. Cho was a beautiful young woman, and most guys quite enjoy it when someone who looks like her shows an interest in him, and Charles was no different.

Nothing technically appeared to happen by this time, at least nothing physical (or if it had, Cho had not been bragging about it), but the flirtation was still ongoing, and blatant enough that Harry paid out the first part of the pool, where people bet on who the first target would be.....and surprisingly, four people had bet on Shepherd (two galleons was the entry fee, one for first target and one for conquest), including Ginny.

Wednesday, April 30th, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Dinnertime

There was a buzz in the room, as rumors had been flying that the announcement of the exhibition team would be tonight. There was only one specific slot that everyone felt was secured: Ron at Keeper. He had allowed so many fewer goals than the others that there was no real debate. The big question was where Harry was going to play, Chaser or Seeker.....his being on the team was one of the other locks.....Slytherin having no team members was also a given. The question that Hooch and her advisors had to answer was this: Would the team be better with Megan and Harry, or with Harry and the fourth best Chaser? The buzz in the Great Hall got even louder when John Terry and Craig Bellamy walked into the Great Hall with Dumbledore and Madam Hooch, this must be it.

The students were forced to wait until dinner was almost over however, and the anticipation was crackling in the air. Dumbledore stood up midway through dessert and cleared his throat.

"Well then, I know you all must be wondering who is on the team. I would first like to introduce Mr. Craig Bellamy, General Manager of the Chudley Cannons and the Welsh National Quidditch Team (much applause, with Ron standing up, revealing his Chudley Cannons t-

shirt). Yes thank you Mr. Weasley, not a fair-weather fan are you. To my right is Mr. John Terry of the Wimbourne Wasps and the English National Quidditch Team (more applause). They, along with their fellow professionals have given their recommendations to Madam Hooch, and she used them, and her own observations to pick the squad that will face the Maple Leaf School of Magic in just four and one half weeks time. Madam Hooch if you will.”

“First things first, a few words about the selection process. The Captain of the team will be the member with the most Quidditch experience among the starting players. Second, we did initially intend to strive for representation from all the Houses when we agreed to this game back in December.....but then events overtook us and one House in our school had it’s team change over a few times, negating our plans. Third, there will be a full reserve team, to allow for easier practicing, but the members on it will only be allowed to take part in game if there is any injury or some other matter that would preclude participation by someone chosen for the main squad, unless I approve otherwise. I personally canvassed all eligible students earlier this term, and they all agreed to this policy.”

“Now, on to the team: The Keeper will be Ron Weasley, with the reserve being Stephen Cornfoot.” No surprise there for either slot, Justin’s debacle against Orla Quirke cinched the reserve slot for his Ravenclaw friend, while Ron continued his pattern of getting better with each game.....and he had only given up two goals to Quirke.

“The Beaters will be Seamus Finnegan and Michael Corner, with the reserves being Clive Lucas and Kevin Whitby.” Beater was always a tricky position to pick, since there were no ready made statistics for them. Seamus had been thought of by the scouts to be the best Beater of a somewhat mediocre year, with Michael’s ability to injure other players with perfectly legal bludger shots thought of as a great asset as well (Michael had not committed one foul the entire year).

“The Seeker.....(she paused for maximum effect, knowing the crowd wanted this one).....will be Megan Jones, with Ginny Weasley as her backup.” The room exploded, as Hufflepuffs were cheering their first (and likely only) member of the first team, and in the glory spot no less. The Ravenclaws were rather stunned that Cho was not

the reserve, but her popularity in the House was not what it once was, so there were no open protests from her Housemates. Ginny was one large smile, as she had thought that she had no chance to be on the team in any capacity.

“And finally the Chasers: Orla Quirke, Katie Bell, and Harry Potter on the first team, with Natalie McDonald, Laura Madley, and Anthony Goldstein as the reserves. A note of explanation for these last choices: It was decided by all of us that the team would be better off with Mr. Potter as a Chaser, given his results in the one game he played at the position, as well as in the student pickup games, which I have watched more than a few of.....Miss Jones proving that she can measure up as Seeker, otherwise Mr. Potter would be playing there. Katie Bell being the most senior player on the team, starters or reserves, will be the Captain. Team members, see Miss Bell about the first practice, good evening.”

The din at the Gryffindor table was very loud, as they had placed six players on the team in some way, and four starters. Harry was kind of torn about playing Chaser in the game: on the one hand Seeker was his spot, the one he had always trained for and thought of himself as.....on the other hand, there was a lot more action at Chaser, and he would be much more involved in the game. Ron and Katie were no surprises, but there was one Gryffindor who was. Harry banged on the table for quiet and raised his glass:

“I want to congratulate someone tonight, someone who is playing his first year of Quidditch and still made the first team for the exhibition, the best Beater of the season. Not bad for someone who wandered into one of our pickup games on a whim, and found out that he liked it. Let’s hear it for Seamus Finnegan!” All the Gryffindors screamed as one:

“Seamus Finnegan!”

Seamus was very red right about then, both from embarrassment at being singled out like that, but from pride as well. He was the only first season player on the main team, with Ron and Orla being in their second seasons; Megan, though in her first season as a starter, had been on the reserve team for three years (she had backed up Cedric

before inexplicably being beaten out the year before for the starter spot); Michael in his fourth season, and Katie and Harry in their fifth each. This was a very proud moment for him, and he very much appreciated Harry acknowledging him with that toast.

After the meal, Madam Hooch waited by the door and took Katie, Megan, and Harry aside for a short chat.

“Miss Bell, when do you plan to have the first practice, and how often?”

“I would like a couple of days to plan out some strategies, so probably Saturday for the first practice, sometime in the afternoon. I’ll talk to the team members about what weekdays would be best, we’ll have at least three practices a week I would think.” In the early part of the year Katie had asked Harry if he wanted input into things like that for the Gryffindor team, feeling that he was unofficially co-Captain anyway. He had declined though, saying that whatever she wanted to do was fine with him and that she was in charge (though he had helped with Chaser selection at the tryouts). So while it surprised Madam Hooch that Katie didn’t look Harry’s way when she answered the question, it didn’t surprise Harry.

“Good, I will be there to observe things, but it will be your team to run. Now, on to one last matter. Miss Jones, Mr. Potter.....Seeker selection was the hardest part of the process for picking the team, and it came down to either Mr. Potter and Miss Madley, or the way we eventually went. The rules that we agreed on with Maple Leaf allow for one non-injury substitution, and this position is the one we might have to use it for. This is not to impugn your talents Miss Jones, not at all, the first Seeker in ten years to catch three Snitches, ironically it being a Weasley who last did it.....but Mr. Potter is Mr. Potter, and is the best player in the school. If we are down thirteen or fourteen goals I will authorize a switch if Miss Bell decides that she wants it.” Megan did not look as insulted as she had every right to be, but Harry did not like one bit the position he had just been put in, and said so.

“Well let’s not go that far, I don’t know how comfortable I would be, looking over someone else’s shoulder all month. Megan, as far as I’m

concerned you are the starting Seeker, period. I'm not in favor of that kind of replacement option, and would only take the position in the case of a legitimate injury."

"Nor am I Madam Hooch. Megan earned her spot, and I won't substitute for her unless she's injured, period." Megan didn't know what to say here, but felt she should add something.

"It's ok, we'll all just have to make sure we whip them so badly we don't need to substitute." Surprisingly, Madam Hooch just nodded her head and moved off, not arguing the point at all. A clearly uncomfortable Harry and Katie held Megan back.

"We had no idea she was going to do that Megan, really. If that took some of the joy out of you being named to the team.....I cannot apologize enough." Megan smiled at him, in a nice way too.....this was the first conversation the two of them had ever really had, in six years of going to school together (she was in the DA, but not the Council).

"It's ok Harry, I know you wouldn't have wanted that.. All the sixth years know that there isn't much glory leftover after you get your share.....but you earn it, and you unwillingly sacrifice a lot at the same time.....and more importantly you never rub it in our faces or brag. I expect some pointers though in practice."

"Well I have a better idea, I happen to have ready access to the last Seeker to get three Snitches in a season, and I'm sure he can be prevailed upon to come here for a couple of practices.....and I know Katie wouldn't mind that." He winked at his friend as he said that, he and Ron had been teasing her constantly ever since the wedding about her and Charlie. Letters had been exchanged, but that's all Katie would say. She elbowed him the ribs, but was grinning while she did it.

"I meant what I said to Hooch, you will be Seeker for the entire game, barring injury. You had a wonderful season Megan, I'm going to make it a point to come to next year's Gryffindor/Hufflepuff match to see you and Captain to be Harry over here duke it out for a full game." They walked off to their respective Common Rooms, and Megan

never did tell her fellow Hufflepuffs about what Madam Hooch had.....well let's call a spade a spade, what Madam Hooch had threatened. Katie and Harry felt that they, combined with the lightning fast Orla Quirke, had no chance of going down too far in goals, and it would be a moot point.

Thursday, May 1st, 1997

Great Hall, Hogwarts

Lunchtime

Lunch was the same as any Hogwarts Thursday (chicken fingers and goulash as the main dishes). Teachers were harping on their fifth and seventh year students, with OWLs and NEWTs right around the corner. The younger students were looking forward to the end of the school year, now just a bit less than two months away.....and then it happened.

The doors to the Great Hall are generally not closed during the lunch period, as students were constantly coming in and out, some each quick meals and taking food with them, some lingering to chat. Harry was at his normal place, about halfway down the Gryffindor table, in between Neville and Ginny, with Ron across from them, and then they heard it, a klaxon sound that shrieked loudly. The teachers all looked at each other, and knew what those alarms meant: they were attached to the one-eyed witch passageway, the one non-floo link between Hogwarts and the outside world that did not involve the front doors. Bliss and McGonagall immediately left the teacher table to check on the disturbance, and Shepherd and Flitwick, on either side of Dumbledore at the table, leaned close to him and seemed to both be talking at the same time.

Crabbe and Goyle waited outside the doors, and watched the two female teachers leave. Goyle peeked around the open door and saw no one else at the teacher table standing up to follow suit. He reached out and prodded around with his arm until he found Crabbe (they had not needed the Invisibility cloaks until they were halfway to the Great Hall). He tugged his best friend's arm and they crept slowly into the Great Hall and headed between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables,

down toward where Harry was sitting. The walk, done at a snail's pace as to not bump into anyone, took about two minutes and lo and behold here was Potter. Goyle stomped his foot twice, which was the signal to attack, but the noise of which was lost in the din of the room.

They shrugged off their cloaks and raised their wands, pointing them directly at Harry's head and body respectively:

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry watched all this happen with an almost surreal detachment. His brain, completely relaxed by the great food and the feeling that this had to be the safest place in the world for him, did not seem to comprehend what was about to happen. He saw the two goons raise their wands and begin the incantation that would result in his death.....but somehow he didn't believe it, and didn't get his wand out. He heard the spell almost in slow motion, and once they said Avada he did the only thing he could think of to do:

He tried to Apparate.....and he succeeded, doing so without a crack and landing about a meter from the southwest corner of the room (near the doors), though not without giving himself a splitting headache. He quickly checked himself for signs of splinching and found none.....what the hell had just happened?

Meanwhile, back at the Gryffindor table, the place had gone into bedlam as the two killing curses landed right on the table (they would have been direct hits if Harry had stayed where he was supposed to), the high one from Crabbe just missing Ron across the table by a matter of millimeters. The table splintered into pieces, but not before Neville, Ron, Ginny and more than a few other people had their wands out:

"STUPEFY!"

Crabbe and Goyle, whose reactions were delayed by their astonishment that they had both succeeded and failed at the same time, were hit by no fewer than fifteen stunners launched by Gryffindors and Ravenclaws.....and Blaise, who despite being the furthest away had his stunner land first.....their portkeys might as well

have been rubber ducks for all the use they got. The last half dozen of the spells hit them so hard it kept them upright for a couple of seconds, before they slumped to the ground. Ginny scooped up their wands as everyone else was looking for Harry, where was he?

He had not in fact budged from his place in the corner as he watched the fireworks. He then walked over to the doors and left the room, though not before being spotted by practically everyone in the room. He did not look back even as students called out to him, his mind was swimming too crazily. He headed for the front doors, he suddenly had an urge for some fresh air.

Dumbledore was rooted to his chair, he could not believe what he had just seen, and was very literally having chest pains right now. Madam Pomfrey saw the pain on his face and rushed over to him, but he waved her off as they subsided. Dumbledore fully believed in the Prophecy, and knew that the light side had just had a scare like no other in the last fifteen years.....what could they do if Harry was killed.....and how did he avoid this? All of this was rushing through his brain at breakneck speed as he watched his erstwhile ward walk calmly out of the room.

Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna looked at each other rather stupidly, and got up to follow Harry, just spotting him as he made the turn to go outside. They ran after him and got to the front doors, only to find a sight that was one of the creepiest that any of them had ever seen., and one that no one present would ever forget:

Harry was laughing his head off, with tears of something running down his face. The four of them, along with some other trunk people and faculty who had the presence of mind to follow and came out just in time, heard Harry look at the sky (and presumably, God) and scream happily:

“You can’t do it can you! You want to kill me but you can’t!” He kept turning in circles, still laughing uproariously. When he got dizzy enough he stopped and looked at his friends.

“Ha ha! Oh man it’s good to be alive isn’t it?” He took note of their ashen expressions, and correctly surmised what they were thinking.

"Don't worry, I'm not going crazy.....just yet anyway. Are the goons in custody?" Dumbledore was out there by now, rather unsteadily, and had caught the last of Harry's screaming.

"Yes they are Harry, though they might be in comas for a long time, they must have been hit at least a dozen stunners, I'm frankly surprised they are even still breathing." Indeed the goons were still alive, barely.

"Well nothing is too good for Crabbe and Goyle I always say." Harry still had his huge grin firmly attached to his face. Ginny asked the question that they all wanted to know:

"Harry, did you just Apparate inside Hogwarts?" Harry didn't appear to be really listening to her, but Neville certainly was. Of all those present, he was the only one who had ever seen Harry Apparate, and Harry had clearly done just that.....so he moved quickly to squash this very dangerous line of conversation:

"Of course he didn't Apparate, did you Harry? You used a portkey right?" He poked Harry when he said that, and it seemed to pull Harry out of his happy reverie.....which had been somewhat faked ever since Ginny had asked her question, as he was frantically thinking of how he could explain what he had done. Fortunately Neville had thrown him a lifeline, and he made full use of it.

"Of course I didn't Apparate, you can't do that in Hogwarts Ginny, didn't Hermione teach you anything from Hogwarts a History? I used a one-time portkey on my watch, though I barely had time to activate it. Made quite the mess of the table didn't it?" Harry was slowly coming down from his high, and the shakes were about to be upon him. He quickly decided to get out public sight before they hit.

"Headmaster, shall we go to your office? We need to contact the Ministry and inform Madam Bones and Minister Fudge of what happened." He started walking back inside, quickly. Ron and Dumbledore happened to be standing next to each other and silently questioned each other with raised eyebrows, for once on the same side. The two of them, along with Neville, Luna, and Ginny followed

behind. Blaise and the others went back into the Great Hall, where there was still quite the buzz. Blaise put Sonorus on his throat:

"Ok, ok, calm down kids. Harry is just fine, despite having cheated death for what must the one hundredth time in his rather short life. If there is one thing that this has taught us: Have an emergency portkey on your person at all times! You never know when you might need one. Learn today's lesson well, and further such lessons can be avoided." Blaise didn't believe for one second the story Harry had concocted, but he knew that these kids, however proficient they were at defending themselves now, were still sheep in a lot of ways, and would believe what he told them. Crabbe and Goyle were still lying there on the floor, no one had thought to do anything with them in all the confusion. Blaise motioned to Anthony to use Moblicorpus, and they levitated the unconscious kids and made the walk to Dumbledore's office. They walked quickly enough that they caught up with the others as they heard Dumbledore give the password

"Whatchamacallit." A certain someone's favorite muggle candy bar.

Harry ran ahead and immediately went into the old man's private bathroom, putting a locking charm on the door so that he could have his nervous breakdown by himself. He looked in the mirror and started absently checking for grey hair, to distract himself from his hands shaking. How could two people as stupid as Crabbe and Goyle gotten the drop on him? He shouldn't have needed to do whatever the hell he had done, he should have been ready to hex them into oblivion.....or even killed them, as he was now allowed to do. He knew exactly how they had gotten in, the alarm charms were a dead giveaway now that he had a few minutes to mull it over.....hopefully Dumbledore would do something about it, he didn't dare admit that he knew anything about the passageway. He casually weeded through his memory and decided that this was at least the ninth time in six years that a serious attempt had been made on his life (he included soul sucking as attempts).....and yet again he had gotten away. What did this mean? Was he just the luckiest kid known to the universe? Or did this have something to do with that 'power he knows not' crap?

He collected himself and unlocked the door, entering a room with many worried faces. He saw his friends: Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Blaise, and Anthony.....he saw Professors McGonagall, Bliss, and Shepherd.....and he saw the authority figures: Dumbledore, Fudge, and Bones. The worried faces were staring a pensieve memory being projected from someone's view of the events, for the benefit of the four who had not witnessed them. Once the memory finished playing, and it was reinserted into Shepherd, the assembled folk all turned to stare at Harry.

"So that's what happened, interesting." Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, taking it all in.

"Are you still maintaining it was a portkey Harry?"

"Of course it wasn't a portkey, I would never have had time to use something like that. Somehow I Apparated.....don't ask me how, I can't figure it out myself." The air in the room was sucked in, as Dumbledore attempted to process this new information. He and McGonagall were the only ones in the room who hadn't known about Harry's ability to Apparate (indeed no Hogwarts people not in the room were in the know, outside of Justin).

"When did you learn to Apparate Harry?" Since that occurrence was in fact Fudge's idea in the first place, he felt it time to put in his own two pence:

"He is licensed Albus, I had Travis Biller instruct him and Neville over the Winter Holiday and I granted them special licenses, though with the understanding it was to be used in emergencies only until the summer.....and I think we can all agree that this qualified as an emergency." Nodding heads all around, that was almost the truth, just the timing was lied about. Anthony, who usually said little in Executive Council meetings, preferring to listen and assimilate everything, had the first theory of the day:

"Well it's clearly one of two things: Either Harry can Apparate in Hogwarts and is the only one with this kind special power, or the castle will allow anyone to Apparate if their life will be saved by doing

so, and the book inconveniently declines to mention it." You could see the wheels turning in everyone's minds as they chewed on that. Harry thought it probably the latter, but before he could say anything, Neville had a point to raise, and had so little respect for Dumbledore that he didn't hesitate to make it, even in this company.

"May I suggest a 'temporary' closure of the Owlrey? We don't want this getting out until we have had a chance to spin the story to how we want it." McGonagall didn't wait for her boss' ok and left the office to do just that.

"The pro-Darks are dwindling by the day, but all it takes is one letter by.....say Pansy Parkinson.....to her dear friend Draco, and what just happened will be in Voldemort's ear by dusk."

"True enough Mr. Longbottom, thank you for suggesting it. Now Harry, which of Mr. Goldstein's theories do you prefer?"

"The second one probably.....of all the times my life has been in danger in this castle.....and it is quite the lengthy list Headmaster.....I've never known how to Apparate out of the situation, until now. I'm magically exhausted right now, otherwise I would give it a shot to test the first theory."

Neville closed his eyes and even spoke the incantation out loud, but nothing happened.

"Just checking." Dumbledore smiled faintly.

"I myself have tried before of course, in different parts of the castle, and my results were quite comparable to Mr. Longbottom's just now. While Harry here is quite powerful, his power is not that far in excess of my own, if at all.....so I would tend to agree with Mr. Goldstein's second theory as well. Though when you are fully rested Harry, if you would give it another try." Harry nodded his head.

"If that is the case, I think we've found 'the power he knows not.'"

Author's Note: I made another small canon error last chapter when I said that Orla Quirke and Laura Madley were fourth years.....when in fact they are third years, and had their sorting during Goblet of Fire. Sorry about that, though I guess it was so small that no one caught it. I got another complaint about my Hermione strategy, complaining that gets very old after awhile. If what I do to Hermione is so upsetting, go to the 180,000 other stories that have her as the heroine and leave my attempt to do something different alone, we'll all be better off. One question came up on why Katie was senior to Harry in Quidditch, and whether or not she should have graduated already. My read is that she is indeed only a year ahead of Harry, having made the Gryffindor team in her second year.....and she has played three more matches than Harry, making her senior: one more in first year, when Harry was in the hospital after dealing with the stone, and two more after he was suspended in his fifth year. Oh, let's remember that one galleon equals five dollars for the purposes of our story. The exhibition game is this chapter, and while it may look like I'm promoting Canada, I'm actually an American from Michigan.

And one last thing: Due to the detail that I'll have to go into for the next chapter (you'll understand when you get to the end of this one), Chapter 34 will not be posted for two weeks, not the customary one week between chapters. I'm getting slammed at work and I'm just coming home too tired to write most nights, so most of the next chapter will be done on the weekends.

Thursday, May 1st, 1997 (continued)

"I think we just found 'the power he knows not.'"

They all sat there, pondering that. It was something that Tom Riddle would not know from his time at Hogwarts in the late 1930's and early 1940's, given that the only threats to anyone's lives were in fact directed by him, without anyone knowing who the culprit was. How to use it was the thought circulating through their minds. Maybe Moody had had a point: Harry would know how to use it when the time came. McGonagall, who had by now returned from sealing off the Owlrey, brought the conversation to a slightly different tack.

"Did you know about the passageway Harry?" Oh yeah, like he was going to give a straight answer to that question, he wasn't that much in shock.

"As the Americans would say, I plead the Fifth. Are you going to seal it up?" This did not appear to satisfy the old man, though the other adults smiled.

"I think we have to, the alarms we had on it didn't quite do the trick. Minister, Madam Bones, what is to become of these two?"

"We will question them of course, Biller will do it I think, he has quite the expertise at handling Death Eaters." Kingsley Shacklebolt was officially Head Auror, but Travis Biller (who was second in command) was the Auror that Fudge had the most trust and faith in.....and the fact that he was not a member of the Order of the Phoenix and couldn't stand Dumbledore contributed mightily to that. Part of Harry wanted to do the questioning right here, and with some sharp instruments.....but the other part just wanted to get on with his day and try to forget it ever happened. Fudge seemed to anticipate this dilemma, and much to Dumbledore's barely hidden displeasure, reassured Harry.

"Once the interrogation is concluded Harry, we will of course inform you of what we've gleaned.....but if you insist, I will include you among the questioners." Harry contemplated this for a second, and recognized the inherent trap inside it. On the one hand, he knew Crabbe and Goyle better than anyone in the room.....but on the other, he again didn't want to appear more important than he was, and did not want himself put out front like this, which could be used against him later by manipulative Headmasters.....or former Headmasters, as would be the case in less than two months time (though Harry never acknowledged to any teacher besides Bliss and Shepherd that he knew about the 'retirement').

"No thanks Minister, I know Travis will get at the heart of the matter, and I'm sure he'll ask any question that I could think of.....me not being a professional and all." The look of relief on Dumbledore's face was noticeable to all, and Harry was hard pressed not to smack him. So, just to irritate the old man.....

"That said sir, as a kind of a reparation if you will.....I wouldn't mind having the two Invisibility Cloaks that they used." Dumbledore again showed his emotions on his face, and Fudge played along with pleasure.

"Certainly Harry, they're all yours." Blaise and Anthony had thought quickly enough to include the cloaks in their removal of the two goons from the Great Hall, and Harry quickly took physical possession before someone changed their minds. The students were soon dismissed, though not before Ginny rammed her foot in each of Crabbe's and Goyle's personal areas, and the others were careful to step on them as well.

Harry was not yet brazen enough to try and lay some surveillance charms in the old man's office, which is a shame because he missed a raging argument between Fudge and Dumbledore over what the Minister had offered to Harry, and the ease to which Crabbe and Goyle had penetrated the castle. The teachers mostly stayed out of it, while Bones acted as a halfhearted referee, though she agreed with Fudge on most of the points of dispute. The highlights:

"I gave him the cloaks to mollify him Albus, given that your so-called security allowed those two into the castle! The fact that you had alarms on the passageway is proof that you knew of the dangers, yet did nothing to prevent them! You were more interested in catching Potter at breaking rules than you were in protecting your students, I know your mind. Thank your lucky stars that it was Potter they were going after too, any other student would have been killed, and you would be brought up on negligence charges, which I still might do, considering that these two will be charged with attempted murder." Dumbledore rarely listened closely to anything this man said, and wasn't about to start now.

"You give him everything he wants Cornelius, and while up until now I agree he has not asked for much, it's a slippery slope. One day he's going to go too far and you'll be the one regretting it!" Fudge had brief moment of thankfulness that the old codger didn't know that he had authorized Harry and company to kill Snape if they wanted to.

"Once again deflecting the main issue Albus. Thank goodness Bill Weasley is now head of the Order, considering that you spend so much time trying goad Harry into rule breaking, no wonder your part in the war this time can be best described as ineffectual. I am ordering you to seal that tunnel today! Remember old man, just because I haven't passed any new Educational Decrees this school year, doesn't mean I can't do so now." This sprung the teachers upright in their chairs, and they alternately cursed both Fudge for his meddling and Dumbledore for his intransigence. The old man decided to end this debate now before any impromptu duels broke out.

"I agree that the tunnel needs to be sealed, and I will do so as soon as this meeting is adjourned. Amelia, what will Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle be charged with?"

"Attempted murder for certain, as the Minister said, plus unlawful entry of the school.....further charges will depend on the results of the questioning." Shepherd made the first teacher foray into the debate in awhile.

"If Voldemort sent them in here, their memories were certainly modified. Portkeys notwithstanding, I'm sure he knew that this was a one-way mission, which is why he chose two expendable soldiers. Our only hope for information is if Draco sent them in here on his own and didn't think that far ahead." Bones nodded her head.

"I agree with Charles, I doubt we'll get anything out of them, but we have to try." Even though the two kids were barely breathing, she shot out some magical ropes and tied them up for transport. She took out a portkey and went back with them to the DMLE. Fudge and Dumbledore said a couple of very stiff goodbyes and the Minister went back to his office, and Dumbledore to the tunnel. He first walked the length of it and sealed the Honeydukes side of it, then did the same to the Hogwarts side. Now the only non-floo way into Hogwarts was through the front door.

Harry held an Executive Council meeting that night and managed to convince them that it was an emergency portkey on his watch that he always carried. He was still pretty shaken from the experience, the more so (as said before), because this was supposed to his safe

haven. He personally checked the passageway himself that night and confirmed its sealing.

Crabbe and Goyle finally woke up the next day and were questioned under Veritaserum for about ten minutes before the following things were discovered: They had Dark Marks on their forearms, as expected; Voldemort had put them under Imperius and given them their instructions to kill Harry.....and that was it. Peter Pettigrew had taken his time and done an efficient job at his memory modification, and basically erased the last four and a half months of dangerous activities from their minds. Not so much as one squib killing or Vernon Dursley beating was left in their memories. This left the Ministry with a quandary of what to charge them with, since it was custom that all crimes committed under Imperius be dismissed. The only thing they could be charged with was being Death Eaters (which they did admit to doing voluntarily). Then Bones remembered Zach Smith and started questioning them about the student beatings, which produced some more crimes. They refused to say one word unless under Veritaserum, so they were given a quick trial the next day and sentenced to four years each in Azkaban and to have their wands snapped forever. Bones managed to talk Fudge out of charging Dumbledore with negligence. She reminded him that the old man was losing his job in two months time and that he would be out of Fudge's hair, for the most part.

Ah yes, the new and improved Azkaban, which was also housing their former schoolmates Marcus Flint, Sean Touchet, Matthew Miller, Neil McCauley, and the others involved in the Battle of the Ministry from November. After the nightmare of the November breakout, it had been Kingsley Shacklebolt's primary task to harden the security there.....after a strong reminder from Bones and Fudge that this was not to be fodder for Order meetings. He had taken the drastic step of totally isolating the prison from the outside world, except for the floo from Fudge's office and Bones' office. He put up strong anti-portkey wards as well, which is how Voldemort and his crew got in there the last time. There were also multiple Notice-Me-Not Charms on the island, as well as the standing Muggle Repelling Charms that were on all wizard governmental buildings. Therefore, a raid on Azkaban would have to have access to the offices of Bones and Fudge, not an easy task, as Shacklebolt had also strengthened security there as

well.....and had made it personalized enough that Percy could not access it after his fall from grace and subsequent turn toward the other side. At the end of his labors, which took a couple of months and involved a lot of test runs, Kingsley felt secure in telling his bosses that it would take a full out assault on the Ministry itself and a lot of luck to get into Azkaban now. Whether that luck would be tested was anyone's guess, but by early May there had not been any attempts.

News of Harry's escape did of course make the papers, and Harry did a pre-emptive strike by owling a press release right to The Daily Prophet and to The Quibbler, describing the portkey and how it had worked for him. They printed it with full fanfare and every accepted it without question. The idea that someone could Apparate in Hogwarts was just too unreal to believe, and like Neville most had tried as soon as they learned how. They knew that Harry was powerful, but no one was that powerful. Voldemort barely grunted as he read the stories, he could readily believe that Potter was that paranoid.....he had trained the lad well over the years. He too accepted the story, as did Pettigrew, it just made the most sense. Pansy was the only eyewitness they had contact with, and she wasn't bright enough to see what happened for what it really was.

Thursday, May 8th, 1997

Harry's Trunk, Hogwarts

In the evening, sometime after dinner.

Harry surveyed his guests as they lounged around the trunk: Seamus, Dean, Parvati, and Lavender. Not his usual crowd mind you, but this was business. He turned to his two male friends.

"Dean, Seamus, how much have you told Lavender and Parvati about the archers?" Seamus and Dean immediately exchanged guilty looks, which told Harry all he needed to know.....but that's not what this was about.

"Relax guys, I fully expected you to tell them, and I was only going to say something if it got around, which it didn't. Thanks for that by the

way. No, I want to incorporate the girls here into the plan." This statement put confused looks on all four of their faces, which pleased Harry a little bit. Parvati was the first to reply:

"How so Harry? You want the two of us to learn to shoot those arrows?"

"Not really, though it will help if you know the mechanics of the process. What I want you two to do is be the spotters for each of the groups. I want to station you two on the towers with some Omnioculars and have you tell these two, and me via a mirror, what is coming at us.....plus what kind of damage the volleys of arrows are doing." Lavender looked a bit skeptical of this:

"Isn't this something one of the little kids could do? Won't you need us with our wands if the fight comes here?"

"Ideally yes, but I need two people I can trust to do this, and I trust you and Parvati far more than some twelve year old who couldn't cut it firing the bow. I need people who can accurately describe what's going on. Once the Death Eaters enter the castle, the archers will break up and you four will head down to the main battle with wands in hand, while the second years make their escape. The archers are just meant to slow them down, I don't seriously think that this will prevent the main body of Death Eaters from entering the castle."

"Well if it's what you want Harry, I'm in." Parvati.

"So am I, you're right, better us than a little kid who might not know what they're seeing."

"Great, I wasn't going to order you to do it (yes he would have, but it played better doing it like this), and I'm glad that you're on board. Now Dean, Seamus, have you picked out the five archers like I asked?" About two weeks earlier, Harry had asked the two guys to cull out the five best archers in their groups, for a special project that he had planned for them. He had done a recon on the two towers (snicker) and found that it might be a little tight to have twenty people on each tower, plus the two sixth years on each (it had been in his

mind for a few weeks to have Parvati and Lavender be the spotters, he just never thought of it at the right time to tell them).

"We have, but there's a small complication." Harry raised his eyebrows as if to ask 'such as?', and Seamus took over the explanation from Dean.

"Well we've had the archers split time at both shooting at targets and at doing the parabola type shooting like they'll be doing on the towers, and there are five that have separated themselves.....but two of them are Daniel Garcia and Xavier Jones. They aren't the best shooters, that's Roy Figg, but I'd have to say they're probably second and third behind him." Yeah this was a complication all right, he was kind of wary about having the two first year boys anywhere near the fighting anyway.....but the overall defense had to come before these kinds of feelings, and if Daniel and Xavier were willing (as he suspected they would be), then they should be on the team..

"Well if they're good enough, then they're good enough. They're both twelve years old by now, and at that time in my life I was fighting a giant Basilisk.....all I'm going to be asking of them is to fire some arrows."

"You want these five as part of the main defense in the castle?"

"I do, it'll either be a nasty surprise for the invaders after they've survived the initial barrage outside.....or even if they're not surprised it will force them to put up solid shields right from the get go and give us our advantage that way. Now, on a related matter, I've arranged for us to do our archer dress rehearsal. We're going to do it Sunday during the staff meeting, when all of the teachers will be talking about Merlin knows what for over an hour. Only Filch will be around, and I'm going to have Peeves distract him." Harry's ability to manipulate Peeves was considered one of the marvels of the school by the other students, though it really was very simple: bribery. Harry reckoned that he had spent at least fifty galleons this year buying WWW products (at a discount no less) to give to the troublemaking poltergeist, though the results had been well worth it. Added to that was that Peeves had a soft spot for memories of the Marauders

(even though he had insulted Remus during third year, he had joked with him just as much when the students weren't around).

"My Auror mentor Travis Biller will be in on the meeting, and he'll make sure there aren't any surprises for us while we're doing our business. We'll have all of you snuck up to the towers before the meeting starts, and then when Travis gives us the signal, you can begin the firing."

"What if we do get caught?"

"Well Parvati, I looked it up in the Hogwarts Rule Book and there is nothing in there that says we can't have an archery club, or that we can't have our practices from the tops of the towers.....as long as no one gets hurt, and I'll have people on the ground to make sure that we don't have any stray students wandering around in your path. I'm also going to take measurements on the ground and put some markers down.....you know, one for one hundred meters, another for one-fifty and so on. That will help you and Lavender with your spotting.....and if worse comes to worse, I'll take the heat from Dumbledore and all the punishment, since it was my doing. That said, we're not going to get caught." Seamus and Dean were already getting excited at the opportunity to do a live firing from the towers. Dean had one last question:

"When do you want to talk with the five?"

"We'll wait until after the rehearsal, I want to see them in action and get a feel for it, though I trust your choices and have no interest in messing with them." Harry had only been to one practice for each of the groups, not wanting it to seem like he was looking over the two guys' shoulders. He invited the four of them to lounge around the trunk for awhile and relax, and he went off to do other things. His Listening Charm picked up all sorts of strange sounds that left Dobby and Winky more than a little revolted afterward.

Sunday, May 11th, 1997

With thirty minutes to go before the staff meeting, Seamus and Dean began taking their people up to the towers for the practice shoot.

They each had one of Lee's prototype mirrors (by now he could get ten people on the signal with full visual, fifteen with just audio) and Harry directed them, using the Map as his guide, to make sure there were no stray teachers or nosy Prefects. Ron, Neville, and Anthony were down at the front doors, making sure that no one went outside during the exercise, and Blaise, Ginny, and Luna were patrolling beyond the arrow limit to ensure that nobody came toward the arrows from that direction.

Biller gave them the signal from the staff room (he tapped the mirror behind his back, surreptitiously put it in his lap, and then cracked his knuckles loudly). Harry got on his mirror and gave the go ahead to start firing. Dean and Seamus each took up their own bow, and fired the first arrows, and got pretty good distance on them. The kids then did the same, and a couple months of practice came to fruition as thirty-seven second years and two first years fired their arrows. Harry, who was now at the front door with his three friends watched as the arrows all went up in a (somewhat) graceful arc and then rained down on the ground. Ron was the only one right away with something to say:

"I say we get hold of a time turner and go back to the Braveheart set so we can see this done live." They all laughed, and Harry spoke into the mirror and had them loose another volley. This time Dean and Seamus just watched as the kids did it again.....breathtaking. After this volley, Harry had them stop while Ron, Neville, and Anthony retrieved the arrows, and Harry ran out with a special Neverending Tape Measure, and a small can of florescent paint. He made markers every twenty meters all the way up until four hundred (no, the kids could not shoot that far, or even close, it was done to give Parvati and Lavender points of reference). By the time he was done with this, and he really should have done this earlier, over half of their time was burned up, so to be safe he only had them do another two volleys (picking up seventy-eight arrows takes some time as well).

Harry checked the Map again, there were no lurkers or anyone who had seen anything that they shouldn't have. He was more than satisfied with the test, and thought that Voldemort and his gang would be in for a rude surprise if the time ever came for it.

"Good job guys, time to head back. Seamus, Dean, have the five you picked out meet us in the Common Room. Luna, you guys come on back too, we're done here." The four of them waited for the three others, and once they arrived, they shrunk the arrows down and pocketed them. They returned to the Common Room, where they met with the five in Harry's trunk (they were all boys, and thus did not need to know about the floo system). They were: Roy Figgar, Xavier Jones, Daniel Garcia.....and two Slytherins, Frank Castle and Quentin Glass. Harry pitched his frontline idea to them, and they all responded with great enthusiasm. Harry privately thought he was going to be sent straight to hell just for suggesting this, but he went ahead with it anyway. Frank Castle had a question before they left:

"Harry, what makes you so sure that they're going to invade us?"

"I'm not Frank, but this is the most logical place to hit us if they want all of the powerful light wizards wiped out. They know that the Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix will come a running if they invade here, and it will put all of us in one place.....and it will, in theory, make the adult light wizards wary of doing too much, if us little kids were to get in the way. Would I bet my vault on it? No I wouldn't, but nevertheless I think it's going to happen before the school year is out. That's why we need every advantage we can get, and you five are part of that, whether I like it or not.....and believe me, I would prefer to ship you off with the first years, I don't want anyone to get hurt." After a few more minutes of talk about the archery, Harry sent them on their way, with strict warnings to keep quiet about his trunk and how big it was inside. He closed his eyes and said a prayer that those five kids would never have to kill anyone.....but even in his heart he knew it was a waste of time hoping that.

Saturday, May 17th, 1997

Today was a big day at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, it was the rollout of the electronics. In the morning they were doing the presentation at their shop in Diagon Alley, to cater to the adult customers, while they would go to Hogwarts at night and make their pitch then to the students. They helped the adult turnout to their big demonstration by placing a full page ad in The Daily Prophet announcing nothing but a 'big test' demonstration. By this point the

twins had gotten a well deserved reputation for innovation, and a large crowd assembled outside the WWW premises at 11:00 that morning. Fred and George had borrowed the projection screen television that Harry had given Bill and Ashley for Christmas to make their demonstration, and they had the entire crowd enraptured with their showing of Jurassic Park.....with very loud sound, as they had magically enlarged the shop to it's limits so that they could fit everyone inside it. The rest of Diagon Alley was a ghost town as even some of the other merchants came by for the showing. Lee, Charlie, and Bill handed out free cans of Coke to the spectators and answered any questions about what was going on.

After the movie was over, the twins explained the principle of the damping field to the crowd, and how it could be discreetly done in the home to allow people to use their soon to be bought televisions, video cassette players, and compact disc players. The twins had not ultimately found a way to make it a one-time use spell, so part of the purchase price went toward one of them (or Lee) to go the buyer's house or apartment and do the spell personally.....though it would still last a year before needing to be renewed. They showed off the compact disc players next, and specifically tailored the music to skew older (keep in mind that CD recorders were not mainstream at that point, and DVD players were still four months away from their debut). They priced the television/VCR package at 135 galleons (for a 20 inch television and a standard VCR, with the fully fueled generator as well), and wound up selling seventy such packages, as well as sixty more of the compact disc players (priced at 30 galleons, with no generator needed, but sixth month supply of batteries included in the price). Those buyers also needed videotapes and compact discs as well, and by the time the afternoon was over WWW had cleared over 15,000 galleons gross, which nearly sent every Weasley and Jordan in the room into a dance of joy. It was 4:00 by the time they finished and closed the store early so that they could rest up and get over to Hogwarts.....though the shop would be open for special hours on Sunday to make up for closing early.

The nighttime demonstration was even more packed into the Great Hall, as it was deemed a school function by Professor Hill, he of the Muggle Studies department. Dumbledore had no real objection to it, it seemed harmless enough to him. McGonagall outwardly did her tsk

tsking, but secretly she found the twins very amusing and had let them get away with more than their fair share of unpunished mayhem over the years. Now the vast majority of Hogwarts students didn't have that kind of coin just laying around so that they could purchase the electronics, this was more along the lines of priming the pump for summer, and for seventh years to ask for them as graduation presents. This time WWW showed Star Wars to the crowd, and still wound up selling ten sets right there on the floor.....ostensibly to be used during the summer, as Dumbledore wouldn't likely take it kindly to having magical dead spots all over the castle. That's ten in addition to Bliss, Shepherd, McDowell, and Hill, who all bought them (Shepherd paid for all four, as these were the colleagues he got along with best, and 900 galleons for the hardware and movies meant little to his bank account).

Harry met privately beforehand with Professors Sprout, Flitwick, Shepherd, and McGonagall and assured them that the damping fields could easily be reversed, and that he would personally pressure the purchasing students to keep their grades up. He pointed out that Ron, Neville, Ginny, and himself all had the electronics in their own trunks, and their grades were all top ten in their class, except for Ron, whose grades had risen significantly during the year (Ginny was ranked fifth in her year, while Neville had moved up to tenth after Draco dropped out.....Luna only watched movies with her friends, as she was too busy studying otherwise).

The twins and Lee also sold twenty compact disc players and lots of discs, mostly to Ravenclaws who had been 'forced' to listen to Anthony's player in recent months and constantly argued with him over his musical tastes (he was into classic rock). This had easily been the single best selling day in the short history of WWW, and the gravy train would only keep rolling, as the people who bought the hardware would want more movies and CD's, and there would also be new buyers of the hardware once the word got out. Harry did all the Hogwarts damping fields himself, as the twins, Lee, Bill, and Charlie spent most of Sunday afternoon flooring from house to house doing so for the outside customers. By the end of the month WWW had sold another seventy television packages, and eighty more compact disc players, and people were constantly dropping into the shop to buy tapes, discs, and gasoline for the generators (which the

twins bought retail and added very little markup). The customers could easily have gone into the muggle world and bought the stuff at slightly lower prices with more selection, but they wanted to give the business to wizards and keep the money in their world.....plus the twins and Lee were so likeable and friendly that customers often hung around for awhile, shooting the breeze with them.

By month's end Zonkos had renewed their offer with double the upfront money and seven percent of the business, but Fred and George turned them down flat, with Harry's wholehearted agreement. There was now more than enough money to open a second shop in Hogsmeade or Dublin, and between themselves Fred and George agreed to bring Ron in after he graduated, even if just on a part-time basis if professional Quidditch wound up calling him. Talking amongst each other, they and Lee agreed that Harry would not last long in Great Britain after the war was over, and would be the perfect choice to open a WWW shop in North America or Australia, places he was talking about visiting with more and more frequency.

Friday, May 30th, 1997

4:00 pm

Hogwarts

It was a scene reminiscent of the Tri-Wizard Tournament two and a half years earlier, the Houses were lined up waiting for students visiting from another school. The Canadians were coming via the carriages, having taken a series of portkeys from Toronto to London to Hogsmeade. They were due to spend the weekend at Hogwarts, with the game on Saturday and just some general getting to know you things on Sunday, to promote international cooperation.

The carriages soon approached, and arrived at the front doors. Harry had quietly placed a tape player near the door that started playing 'Oh Canada' as they arrived, a nice touch that even Dumbledore appreciated. A woman in her late 40's stepped out first, followed by two young men that were so imposing that they were either her sons or her bodyguards.....or both. Dumbledore approached her, this exhibition weekend was scheduled to be his swansong at Hogwarts,

and he wanted to go out in style, the two school heads smiled at each other as they approached.

"Madam Bonner, a pleasure to see you again."

"Albus, it's been a long time. These are my sons Robert and Ambrose, Robert is our Quidditch instructor and Ambrose plays in the American professional league." They shook hands with the Headmaster, and he kissed her hand as well. The three Bonners appeared to be the only adults in the party.

"May I introduce Minerva McGonagall, our Deputy Headmistress." She smiled at them warmly, a rare sight in itself, as the Canadian students got out of their carriages. They had brought a full reserve team as well, just in case, and the fourteen of them lined up behind their leaders.

"This is our Captain, Seth Bullock." A medium height, muscular young man stepped forward and shook hands.

"Our Captain is Katie Bell." She did likewise, and was relieved to see that there were quite a few girls among the fourteen, this wasn't to be a testosterone game at least. Harry and Ron, standing with the other Gryffindors, saw nothing out of the ordinary in their opponents, no giants (figuratively) or mighty mites.....they all looked normal.

Dumbledore led everyone inside, and personally led the Canadians to the guest quarters, where they could have a chance to rest a bit and get cleaned up before dinner. Like everyone visiting a new place, the Canadian kids spent a lot of time staring. Their own campus was not a castle, but rather a series of small buildings on the edge of Toronto that looked much like a muggle apartment complex. They had heard about the castle of course, but it was a trip to be in one, as those things don't exist in their home.

Dinner that night was nothing too out of the ordinary. Dumbledore and Bonner gave nice little speeches about their respective schools, and told of discussion groups that would be held on Sunday between the students, to get to know their counterparts. For this night, and for breakfast and lunch the next day, the Canadian players would sit

together at one end of the Slytherin table, since that House had been much reduced over the school year due to drop-outs, transfers, and expelling , so that was the table that had the most room. The Canadians were very friendly, and seemed to smile a lot. Likewise the Hogwarts kids went out of their way to be polite. They had all received lectures from their various professors of course, but there was a genuine curiosity about their brothers and sisters from across the water. The older students remembered all about the Tri-Wizard Tournament and how rude the Beauxbaton students had been, and how they had not even been allowed by Karakoff to talk with the ones from Durmstrang (except for certain Slytherins), and they were pleasantly surprised with their guests.

After dinner, Shepherd signaled Harry not to leave the Great Hall just yet. He lingered on, telling his friends he would catch up to them. He chatted with Shepherd for a minute as the students filed out, and was then brought to the faculty table. Madam Bonner had wanted to meet him.

“Mr. Potter, a pleasure, I’ve read so much about you.”

“A tissue of lies (they both laughed), but thank you Madam Bonner. I’m looking forward to the game, and to talking with your students.”

“As they are with you. You’re not quite as famous over in our little corner of the world as you are here, but you’re quite the well known young man. My daughter will kill me if I don’t get an autograph.” He chuckled at that.

“Is she not here?”

“No, she’s not a Quidditch player, and her OWLs are coming up.....we use the same grading system that you do here, she’s a fifth year, my youngest.”

“I know all about OWL pressure, I had them last year and my girlfriend is undergoing it right now.”

“Yes, I’ll be glad when she’s taken her NEWTs and I don’t have to listen to it as much, I relive my own memories when I hear my

children stressing about tests. It was nice to meet you Harry, I hope we get a chance to talk more in depth later on this weekend." Seeing that he was being politely dismissed, he took his leave.

"It would be my pleasure ma'am, goodnight." Harry walked off toward his Common Room, as Bonner turned to Dumbledore and McGonagall.

"So that is who will take on your Voldemort? Can he do it?"

"I hope so, I doubt it will be long now before we find out."

Saturday, May 30th, 1997

Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch

2:00 pm

Against their better judgment, the twins had closed the shop at noon today so that Lee could come out of retirement for one last announcing gig. They were planning on attending anyway to root on their brothers, and figured that there wouldn't be much business anyway.

"Welcome everyone to our First Annual Hands Across the Water Quidditch Game, between The Maple Leaf School of Magic in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Parts Unknown, Scotland! I'm Lee Jordan, back for a return engagement as your intrepid announcer, and it is a pleasure. Now here are the teams!" The Canadians were all on their newly created Nike brooms, as wizard Phil Knight finally turned his attention away from muggle sports for a moment to create a modestly priced, very fast, broom for Quidditch. These were the brooms that Maple Leaf had been using all season, donated by a wealthy alum. Part of the deal was that the flyers had to use the same brooms that they had all season, and the advantage there was clearly with the Canadians.

“For The Maple Leaf School of Magic, their Keeper, a seventh year from Kingston, Ontario, Tom Nuttall!” Nuttall flew out to the center of the pitch, to the polite applause of the crowd, and waited.

“For Hogwarts, their Keeper, a sixth year from Ottery St. Catchpole, England, Ron Weasley!” A large roar from the crowd as Ron flew out to shake hands with his counterpart.

“For Maple Leaf at Beater, a seventh year from Morrison, British Columbia, Dan Dority!”

“For Hogwarts at Beater, a sixth year from London, England, Seamus Finnegan!” They repeated the handshake, a gesture arranged before the match by Captains Bullock and Bell.

“For Maple Leaf at Beater, a seventh year from Windsor, Ontario, Amos Cochran!”

“For Hogwarts at Beater, a sixth year from Birmingham, England, Michael Corner!”

“For Maple Leaf at Seeker, seventh year and Captain from Toronto, Ontario, Seth Bullock!”

“For Hogwarts at Seeker, a sixth year from Swansea, Wales, Megan Jones!” This caused some shocked looks amongst the Canadians as Harry’s name was not the one announced.....but there he was in his Quidditch robes nonetheless. Harry was the one player they had heard of, and every teen wizard in the world knew two things about Harry: he had survived the killing curse, and that he played Seeker in Quidditch.

“For Maple Leaf at Chaser, a seventh year from Halifax, Nova Scotia, Alma Garrett!”

“For Hogwarts at Chaser, seventh year and Captain from Dundee, Scotland, Katie Bell!”

“For Maple Leaf at Chaser, a seventh year from Montreal, Quebec, Sophia Metz!”

“For Hogwarts at Chaser, a third year from Inverness, Scotland, Orla Quirke!”

“For Maple Leaf at Chaser, a seventh year from Jenison, Newfoundland, Jane Canary!”

“And for Hogwarts at Chaser, a sixth year from Godric’s Hollow, Wales, Harry Potter!” The largest roar went up for him as the crowd yelled their lungs out.

And there you have it, a Canadian team filled with veterans against the relatively inexperienced Hogwarts squad, who could only really call Katie, Harry, and Michael veterans. The Hogwarts team had held ten practices over the course of the last month, a couple fewer than they perhaps would have liked, but NEWT pressure was coming down on Katie and it was all she could do to keep up her studying and her game planning. This was no different for her than it would have been otherwise, as the last game of the Hogwarts season would have been around now, but this was added pressure for her in particular.

Charlie, as Harry had promised, had indeed returned to his alma mater for three of the practices, to give tips to Megan. He worked with her and Ginny quite a bit, showing them new moves and ways to use the bludgers to their own advantage. This was stuff that he had long ago shown Harry, who had used them to great effect (the jumping off his broom was something he had gotten from Charlie). Fred and George too helped out Seamus and Michael for a couple of their weeknight practices, seeing Seamus in particular as a worthy successor to them. The Chasers had combined the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw playbooks to come up with a set number of plays to use, and they seemed to mesh well.....though having often played together on the pickup teams helped that tremendously, something Madam Hooch had noticed.

“And here we go folks! The Captains are shaking hands, very sportsmanlike I must say. Our special referee today will be Pieter Aldrich, a South African who has no national bias for either team. The Snitch and Bludgers are released, and the Quaffle is up!”

"Potter immediately grabs the Quaffle and dodges a bludger shot by Dority, he's heading for Nuttall in the Maple Leaf goal, he's not waiting for Bell or Quirke. Harry is still on his classic Firebolt, which has now won Gryffindor House three straight Quidditch Cups.....he's almost on top of Nuttall as he shoots.....and scores! Gryffindor 10-0 on the first goal by Harry Potter!" McGonagall was not there to keep an eye on Lee, but he had voluntarily promised to be on his best behavior.....as long as the Canadian players were too.

"Garrett now carries the Quaffle for Maple Leaf, a quick pass to Metz, then back to Garrett, good grief these girls pass quickly.....yes, Quirke steals the Quaffle and shoots back toward Nuttall.....and he saves the shot! He passes back to Canary.....but Potter steals it and quickly lays it in to the bottom right hoop! 20-0 Hogwarts!" Meanwhile Megan and Seth Bullock were both stationed at the middle of field, avoiding bludgers and watching for the Snitch, which had made a one second appearance right at first, and then disappeared. The four Beaters were trying to hit the Chasers, but they were all so fast that it soon proved to be fruitless, and they started targeting each other.

"Canary has the Quaffle now, the three Maples are in a Hawkshead Formation, going right toward Weasley in goal.....Metz shoots....and scores! It's now 20-10!.....Potter wastes no time with the Quaffle as he sprints up the east line.....he's almost on top of Nuttall again.....and he goes behind the hoops, whipping the ball to Bell who shoots and scores! A carbon copy of the first goal of the Potter/Bell era in Hogwarts Quidditch, then it was Bell to Johnson, this time Potter to Bell. Wait! Is that the Snitch? Jones and Bullock are tearing downfield after something! Bullock is in the lead on his Nike broom, one not yet available in Britain I might add.....has he got it? No, the Snitch shoots directly upward and has now disappeared again."

Bullock's broom was fast, and his instincts seemed to be on par with Megan's.....which did not bode well for the young Hufflepuff. The Beaters were still wailing on each other, and while there were quite a few nicks and many near misses, no one had been fully hit yet. The six Chasers continued with their blitzkrieg for the next twenty minutes,

and while Ron and Tom Nuttall both made some tremendous saves, the goals still came in rather quickly. At the twenty-five minute mark the score was 150-110, in favor of Hogwarts. The Snitch had not shown itself again, and Bullock had taken to flying around in an ever widening arc, trying to actively find it. He called timeout to give his Chasers a rest, and Katie couldn't really think of anything they could be doing much better. After Megan went back into the air, along with the others, Katie held back Corner.

"Michael, start targeting one of the Chasers with your bludger shots, try and get her out of the game, we need to build the score up just in case Bullock is as good as seems." Without telling her his source, Harry had gone to John Terry and found out that Bullock was considered to be the top Seeker eligible for the upcoming draft and was likely to play for Canada in the World Cup next year.

"You got it Katie." He went back into the air and took his position.

"Potter has the Quaffle again, he shoots, he scores! Harry Potter has his tenth goal of the game as he's flying rings around everyone, this lad can do it all. He or Weasley should make him a Beater next season, just to see. Wham! That was some bludger stroke by Corner.....Ouch! Garrett is hit broadside in her ribs.....oh no, she's slipping off her broom.....but Orla Quirke quickly is there to right her. The other Chasers are continuing to fly as Quirke and Garrett come to the ground. Garrett is clearly hurt badly, and Quirke is staying on the ground until she gets back into the air, as Madam Pomfrey checks her out.....and a goal by Bell! She uses the clearer field and nails the middle hoop from long range, after a nice fake to the left. It's not 170-110 for Hogwarts!" Down on the ground, Madam Pomfrey knitted Garrett's ribs back together.

"You can still fly if you can take the pain young lady, you won't do any more damage to them unless you get by another bludger."

"Thank you ma'am. Let's get back to the game shall we." She and Quirke both rose back to the game, as the crowd cheered them, Garrett for her fortitude and Quirke for her sportsmanship. Garrett, tough as she was though, was not the same player as before when she had scored six of her team's goals (Michael had chosen wisely).

Harry preyed on her and basically took her out of the Maple Leaf offense by stealing the Quaffle from her three times in succession, leading to two Hogwarts goals, by himself and Orla. Bullock called a timeout and huddled with referee Aldrich, getting a ruling.

"We have an injury substitution for Maple Leaf, as Alma Garrett goes off and Joanie Stubbs comes in, a fifth year from Vancouver, British Columbia. Teams are allowed unlimited injury substitutions, though once a player is replaced, he or she cannot return to the game." Stubbs took to the air, and with her fresh energy, quickly scored two goals against Ron, at the cost of another by Harry. The score was now 200-120 in favor of Hogwarts, as Harry was personally tightening the defense around Ron. Michael was now targeting Jane Canary with his bludger shots, and Seamus took the hint and was going after her too. This had the one benefit of basically taking her out of the action, by forcing her to dodge bludger after bludger (the Maple Leaf Beaters were going after Megan, higher up in the air).....but it also allowed Bullock a free hand in looking for the Snitch.

"Quirke has the Quaffle now, she passes to Bell.....stolen by Stubbs, who rushes Weasley.....save by Ron!.....wait, he's not letting go of the Quaffle, he's past midfield and he's advancing on Nuttal! The Hogwarts Chasers are clearing the way for him as a bludger hits Canary in the leg.....and Weasley scores! That's something that his predecessor Oliver Wood never did!" Ron looked a bit embarrassed and yelled out to Harry:

"Sorry, I kind of lost control there for a second!" Katie answered for Harry, fighting back a smile:

"Just get your butt back to the hoops you idiot!" Ron raced back and was just in time to barely save a shot from the quick thinking Stubbs, who had almost beaten him back there. Canary was still in the air despite what looked to be a serious leg wound.....either she was very tough or the fifth Chaser wasn't that good. Dority and Cochran, the Maple Leaf Beaters, renewed their assault on Megan, and she was now flying as close to Bullock as she could, but her broom was not as good and he kept her just behind him, where the beaters could target her better. Katie, when she had time to think about it, was now

somewhat regretting her rigid stance when it came to switching Harry and Megan.....Harry probably wouldn't be hamstrung like this.

"Potter scores again, his fifteenth goal of the game and it's now 230-120 for Hogwarts.....Oh my! A bludger just nailed Jones in the left arm, she's clearly hurt. An injury timeout by Bell. A reminder folks, teams are allowed one regular timeout, and as many injury timeouts as needed."

Megan's arm was indeed broken, and the Hogwarts people looked at Katie for her decision. She had told Natalie that she was the preferred choice to be first substitute for Chaser, since she worked so well with both her and Harry.....Natalie or Ginny, Chaser or Seeker. Harry was outscoring Maple Leaf by himself, but he was the only one she felt comfortable throwing in there against Bullock. She knew that it would wound one of the girls not to be chosen, but she made her decision without consulting Harry or anyone else:

"And Natalie McDonald enters the game as a Chaser, substituting for Megan Jones, with Harry Potter moving to Seeker. This is Hogwarts one non-injury substitution of the game, since it involves switching positions. Potter goes higher in the air and starts marking Bullock, while McDonald has the Quaffle, passes to Quirke.....and she scores!" Harry had not argued the call putting him at Seeker, and braved a look over at Ginny only to see that she was chanting his name as loud as anyone in the crowd. He quickly started scanning the sky for the Snitch.....was it there? In his matches it always liked to appear around Ron, but this time it was near Nuttall on the other side of the field. He and Bullock both rocketed off toward it as Nuttall passed the saved Quaffle back to Metz, only to look up and see the two Seekers heading right for him. The Nike broom (nickname: Air Trafficker) was just as fast as his four year old Firebolt, and he and Bullock were neck and neck with the Snitch inches away.....

WHAM! Harry and Seth rammed full force into Nuttall, who had done a poor job of getting out of the way, and only seemed to fly right into them. Bullock caught the least of it and somehow righted his broom and stayed in the air. Nuttall flew into the goalpost (without his broom), but managed to hang on to the post and slide down unharmed. Harry's broom, while undamaged, was in a sideways spin and was

turning him around as he plummeted to the ground. He saw the Snitch a meter from him and managed to leap off and grab it.....right before he fell the last four meters and crashed into the ground, face-up.

"Harry Potter has the Snitch and Hogwarts wins the game! The final score is 390-130.....but hang on a second, Harry isn't moving down there, someone check on him!" Indeed Harry wasn't moving, every shred of breath had been knocked out of him with his landing, and he had more than a small headache. The Hogwarts team rushed down from the air and out from the holding area, and got there just in time to see him raise his arm.....the one with the Snitch in it.

"He seems to be all right ladies and gentleman, Harry Potter lives again! How about this game folks! The return match is next year in Toronto, and I personally plan to be there.....if only to heckle the Maple Leaf announcer" Ron and Michael helped a woozy Harry to his feet, and he was carried off everyone's shoulders.....which was nice, as he still had trouble breathing and that was the only way he would have gotten off the field. The teams all shook hands, and Harry and Tom Nuttall made sure each other was none the worse for wear (Nuttall had a bloody nose, but that was it), and even though it was not part of the schedule, the kids spent an hour deconstructing the game, comparing plays and notes on what they had done right and wrong. Harry, who had scored the most goals and also caught the Snitch, wheezed through the first part of the discussion before getting his breath back toward the end. The teams then did a flying parade in front of the audience. Not one foul had been committed, nor any penalty shot needed, and the spirit of cooperation and harmony that was intended when the game was organized, was in full force today.

There was a reception that night, as the Canadian players mingled amongst the Hogwarts students, sitting at various parts of the tables, getting to know their counterparts. Harry got to quiz Ambrose Bonner about being a professional Quidditch player, and what it was like to live in the United States, though he didn't mention that he almost had moved there himself. Harry and Ron both hung on the twenty-two year olds every word about the lifestyle, and what his chances were to play for Canada next year (he was a Keeper, and thought he had a decent shot to make the team). He too had been at the World Cup

Finals three years ago, and they promised to get him Viktor Krum's autograph (Viktor played in the Continental Quidditch League, and he and Harry had exchanged Christmas cards).

The next day was a lounging day as there was a lot of interaction between the students, as they all appreciated the hard fought game. Harry spent a lot of time with Seth Bullock, and found the seventh year to be a kindred spirit. Bullock had lost his parents too, though in his case it really was in a car accident, when he was eight years old. The Trio took him around the castle and showed him the sights, just like all the other Canadian players and reserves were doing. The reserves were mostly the younger students (four sixth year students, two fifth years, and a fourth year), most of whom would be the players in next years game, which as Lee said was scheduled to take place in Toronto. The entire Hogwarts starting seven, minus Katie, was eligible to be picked again, though they would be hard pressed by Ginny, Laura Madley, and even a Slytherin or two perhaps.

After dinner, and right before the Canadians were scheduled to depart Hogwarts, Harry had a long talk with Madam Bonner, who got her daughter that autograph, and after a reasonably subtle buildup and sales pitch, she managed to float the idea of Harry coming to work for her after he graduated. She knew, as did most of the wizarding world unfortunately, of his breach with Dumbledore, and she thought that he might want a fresh start somewhere else.

"Think about it Harry, Robert Cochran, Amos' grandfather, is due to retire in a year from the Defense job at my school.....I'm willing to offer it to you right now, for after he retires and you graduate from here, and I'll keep the offer good until the end of the calendar year, then I'll have to do a public search." Harry had a brief moment of mental overflow as he contemplated his future career path, choosing between: WWW, Quidditch, Gringotts, this, and perhaps something else that would come up. He appreciated the offer though, and vowed both mentally and out loud that he would consider it carefully.

"That's a very nice offer ma'am, and I will take you up on the time you're giving me to think about it. You realize that I can't commit to anything until Voldemort is gone?"

"I understand, and I think we both know that the end is coming soon. Dumbledore seems confident about it, and I think you are too."

"I am, he'll force the final battle very soon.....and if he doesn't, I will. I'll spend my entire summer hunting him down if need be."

"Whatever happens will be interesting. You take care of yourself now Harry. Come visit us this summer if the war permits." Thinking of the Toronto bank account he had been curious about, he found himself nodding his head.

"I'll do that ma'am, I'll send you an owl to let you know when I'm coming." They shook hands, and she went back to her students for the trip back, which went off without a hitch. Harry got a lot of questions from his friends, since he had been sequestered with her for over thirty minutes.....but he just blithely framed it as her wanting to know 'The Boy Who Lived' , and wanting some war gossip. The idea of a fresh start was growing on him more and more, and that night he began to get very impatient for the confrontation, something that likely would have festered within him, if subsequent events had not occurred.

Much to certain students' surprise, there was no announcement made over the weekend of Dumbledore's retirement. When queried about it on Monday, Shepherd explained that Dumbledore and McGonagall had agreed to wait until the Leaving Feast to do it, so as to cause as small a ripple as possible. He told Harry that everything was set, and Dumbledore was going to leave peacefully, but that the old man wanted the last month to go smoothly, and with himself still firmly in charge. Most of the kids in the know found that a bit pathetic, the old man still clinging to his power even as he was pushed out the door.

Monday, June 1st, 1997

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

3:00 pm

It was a nice, sunny day, with few clouds in the sky as Voldemort looked over his combined forces and fought back the happy face that was fighting its way out. He had in front of him 500 Death Eaters, 40 fighting trolls, and 36 giants.....all at his command, and all ready for final victory. The plan was three-pronged: One group of ten trolls and forty Death Eaters would go to the Ministry and lay it to waste, counting on surprise yet again to defeat the Aurors and other Ministry personnel. The rest would go to Hogsmeade and sack it, leaving no building unburned and no capable defender left alive.....and then on to Hogwarts for the coup de grace. Voldemort had made one last ditch effort to sway the Dementors to his side, but with no luck, and they would play no part in the upcoming battle.....nor would the werewolves, who had been thoroughly tamed by the promise of a lifetime of Wolfsbane from the trust, and the vampires also decided to sit this one out, there was nothing in it for them either way.

"Today is the day people! Today we claim victory over the mudbloods and their pathetic allies! Today we claim Great Britain for us! No wizard force on earth has ever matched what you are right now, and the Ministry and that fool Dumbledore will fall like grass to our blades.....and we will show them no quarter. You are to kill every adult you come across that raises their wand to you. If they surrender without a fight? You will simply stun them and move on your way. At Hogwarts, always keep in mind the hit list, kill those that are on it, stun everyone else and we will use them for hostages."

With the help of Draco, they had come up with a list of Hogwarts students who were just too dangerous to let live, wands in hand or not. Pictures had been taken from a pensieve memory of Draco's of the following students: Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Terry Boot, Blaise Zabini, Luna Lovegood, Lissa Turpin, and Theo Nott..... the killing of whom was promised to his father Frederick. These pictures were given to all of the fighters and they were told to memorize the faces. Harry too was given to try and kill, but they were instructed to simply capture him if possible, or do what they could to lead him to their Master.

"You all know what to do, go with your group leaders and do your duty to me. Attack!" There was a great roar as they all shouted their responses. Voldemort strode off and Pettigrew found Draco.

"Are you ready Draco? You have everything you need?"

"I do Peter, I'll make our Master proud."

"Go forth and murder my good man, wipe out the last relative our good friend Potter has." They smiled evilly at each other, and Draco portkeyed away.....to Smeltings Academy.

Since the students were still in class, the lobby was empty, and he went up to Dudley's room and easily got it open (Alohomora, Standard Book of Spells, Chapter Seven). He made himself comfortable and idly toyed with Dudley's collection WWW products. Though Draco would never stoop to paying a Weasley for anything, he had to admit that some of the pranks were quite ingenious. After about thirty minutes Dudley and his roommate, Richard Griffiths, came into the room to find their visitor. Draco was under strict orders from Voldemort not to linger or toy with the boy, so he quickly used his wand to kill them both with Avada Kedavra. He then used his hideout knife to stab them both, making it look very muggle-ish. He examined them one last time to make sure they were dead, and portkeyed away to Hogsmeade, where the main battle was now taking place.

Meanwhile, at the Ministry of Magic, the Death Eater force had entered through Percy's office as planned, and set off no alarms. They were led by the redhead himself, as these were mostly new recruits along with the trolls. The first thing he did was kill Perkins, who was astonished at the number of people who kept coming out of his floo.....Percy's only regret being that he couldn't make his boss'.....sorry, ex boss' death take much, much longer. They took the next half hour and laid waste to the Ministry, rampaging through it and leaving no one they encountered alive. The relatively few pro-Voldemort people who worked for the Ministry had been told to owl in sick this day, and thus everyone they came upon was an enemy of some sort.

The Aurors rallied by their own section of the building and with their superior training began mowing down the opposition, killing twenty of the Death Eaters and all of the trolls, even though their own losses

were heavy as well, losing eleven Aurors and countless numbers of Ministry workers in the process. Fudge, Diggory, and Bones were forcibly put in their offices and told to stay there, as they were too valuable to lose, though no one could be spared to guard their doors. There were a total of seventy Aurors in the program all together, including ten from Canada, Ireland, and Australia on loan.....but half that total was not responding the distress signals that each Auror carries on them at all times, and the Biller led Aurors were weakening fast before Auror Sanford Jenkins led a suicidal charge that would kill himself and four other Aurors, but took down another dozen Death Eaters in the process. Percy and the other seven Death Eaters could see the writing on the wall, and they retreated back to his office and flooed to Hogsmeade to join their comrades (one cannot portkey in or out of the Ministry except for specific, hardwired jobs like Bones had access to).

The reason that half the Aurors had not responded to the Ministry call was that they were fighting for their lives in Hogsmeade as they did battle with Voldemort's main battle group, who had mass portkeyed into the town and proceeded to destroy every building they came across, and kill every person that crossed their path.....taking a certain liberty with the orders to kill just those with their wands out. The thirty some odd Aurors did their best to beat back the attackers, but they were outnumbered over ten to one, and Voldemort made sure that each of the Death Eater squads was led by one of his old veterans, who to a man (or Bella) hated Aurors and directed the assault. Within fifteen minutes every building in Hogsmeade was destroyed, and half the population dead, the other half having flooed away before they were killed.

From the edge of the woods came a mass portkey as thirty members of the Order came in, led by Bill and Moody, having been summoned by Madam Rosmerta before she escaped in the confusion, her hard won business literally collapsing around her. All she had said was that there was an attack, not the numbers. Bill couldn't believe it (and this was still without the ten percent of the Death Eater force that had gone to the Ministry). They now heard that chant of 'Hogwarts! Hogwarts!' .....and the worst fears of all of them were confirmed.

"My God in heaven, how did they get that many?" Moody was using his magical eye to scan through the rubble, and he quickly saw that the remaining Aurors (thirteen) were heavily pinned down in two different groups, one near The Hogshead Pub, and the other back against the Shrieking Shack. Said Aurors were the only opposition left until now. Moody and Bill looked at each other and came to a silent understanding. Moody took half their force and moved to the Shrieking Shack, while Bill led the other half toward the other group of Aurors.....except for two of them:

"Fred, George, get into Hogwarts somehow and warn them, we'll hold them off as long as possible, but there may be some already on their way. Go through the trunks and find Harry, he needs to implement our plans now." They nodded and popped off, while Bill led his unit toward the Hogshead, crashing into the rear of the attackers.

Fred and George wasted little time doing as they were told, and within three minutes they were standing, panting, in Harry's trunk. Fortunately our hero was right there, having just gotten back from History of Magic, and was idly talking Quidditch with Ron and Anthony. The three of them looked at the disheveled twin and saw something they had rarely seen before in them: panic.

"Voldemort's sacking Hogsmeade.....they're coming here next Harry, they're coming to Hogwarts."

Author's Note: I would like to thank the following filmmakers for the wonderful battle ideas I've shamelessly cribbed from and alternated a little: Ridley Scott, Mel Gibson, Peter Jackson, John McTiernan, Randall Wallace, Antoine Fuqua, Ronald Maxwell, Chris Columbus (for Home Alone, not necessarily HP's 1 and 2), George Lucas, and many others. I'm a movie nut and these directors and many others have inspired a lot of what I've done here. On another matter, a lot of stuff is happening during this chapter, at more than a couple of locations, and all in a compressed timeframe. I have done my best to keep it clear when stuff is happening, and to make everything plain so that it can be followed. If you want a visual reference, go to the Harry Potter Lexicon and use their maps of Hogwarts, that's directly where I'm taking my floor plans from for this chapter.

Monday, June 1st, 1997 (continued)

Harry's Trunk, Hogwarts

Late afternoon/early evening

Harry spent a split second praying that this was just a bad joke, but that was not to be. During that split second, Anthony asked the obvious:

"How many?"

"Hundreds.....and not just Death Eaters, they have trolls and giants." Harry was back into it now, and he whipped out his mirror (Lee had declared it a finished product the week before, with twenty mirrors on visual and thirty on audio, and Harry had distributed them accordingly. The mirrors could be addressed to individual people, or by saying 'Unicom', to all the mirrors at once)

"Unicom.....Heavy Incoming! Heavy Incoming! This is no drill! Implement Plan A....NOW!"

Heavy Incoming was the signal that the invasion was here, Plan A meant that they had at least a few minutes to prepare, rather than realize it as someone was knocking on the door.

Anthony sprung up and flooed to Luna's trunk where he would re-enter his Common Room.

"How long have we got before they get here?"

"We don't know, they might have sent some forces ahead, but they were just finishing up with Hogsmeade, the village is gone guys, and the Aurors are mostly dead, only about a dozen of them were alive when we left." Harry was already getting up and getting his gear ready: both wands, all three of his knives, and a couple of WWW swamps. Ron went into his trunk to get his gear, and Harry and the twins sprung up the ladder and were soon in the Common Room.....which was in something of a controlled chaos, as those with the mirrors were getting it ready. Harry ran into the room:

"QUIET! Voldemort is coming and we don't have much time to get ready. Second years and friends, go with your leaders and get ready!" Dean, Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender all left with the thirteen kids behind them, as they had quite a hike to the towers.....where their equipment was already waiting for them. Seamus and Parvati had a mirror with them, as did Dean and Lavender. Ron came out of the dorm room, Harry's broom in one hand and a pair of Omnioculars in the other, with his Invisibility Cloak slung over his broom arm (Harry had given the two confiscated Invisibility Cloaks to Ron and Neville). This was not part of the plan, but Harry instantly knew what his best mate had in mind.

"Get out there and get back quickly Ron, and be bloody careful, don't try to attack them.....and come back via the front door, Michael and Stephen should still be there." With a nod, Ron forced the window open and took off. Notable was that no one was calling anyone on the mirrors, Harry had told them that he would never joke about Heavy Incoming, and that they should get ready the moment they heard that. He got on the mirror again himself though:

"Michael! Get the juice out there, I'll hold off the old man from locking down the place, but wait for Ron to come back from his scouting.....hurry!" He got a quick Ok from Michael Corner, and turned his attention back to his Housemates.

"Ok Gryffindors, listen up! All DA people report to Jack Sloper and Ginny Weasley, and do what they bloody tell you.....and stay calm, we have a plan here people, and it will work if we don't panic. This is our home, and we will defend it. First years, come with Neville and me.....now!" Harry and Neville took off at a run toward Dumbledore's office with the first years right behind them, Fred and George bringing up the rear.

A minute earlier in the Ravenclaw Common Room:

Anthony sprinted through Luna's room, praying that the anti-male alarms in there wouldn't nail him (they didn't). He ran into the Common Room to find much the same reaction that Harry had in his:

"It's true people, they're coming. Voldemort is destroying Hogsmeade as we speak, and he's coming here: We got this from the twins, they saw it. Every DA member, report to Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. Second years, get going to the towers now (they left as quickly as they could), first years, come with me, now!"

Michael got his mirror call about the juice, and Stephen was already pointing to three third year boys:

"You three, come with me." They went up into the sixth year boy's room, where Michael and Stephen had stashed the juice, large canisters of it that were shrunk down to fit into three burlap sacks. Each third year grabbed a sack and followed their two elders out the Common Room door.

At this time, in the Hufflepuff Common Room:

Justin was the only one in the House that could really command his Housemates' attention (and only he and Susan had the mirrors), and he did his level best:

"Voldemort is coming, and it's only a matter of minutes! Second year archers, you know what to do (those in the archer brigade left immediately), DA members, report to Ernie MacMillan and Susan Bones. Those of you not in the DA.....you can either join now and

fight with us, or go hide in your dorm rooms, we will spare no one to protect you there. First years, come with me, now!"

The first ones with their wands drawn in the school would reside in the dungeons, as all four of the Exec Council members (Blaise, Daphne, Tracey, and Theo) had the mirrors and reacted instantly, pointing their wands at the twelve pro-Darks, all of whom were in the Common Room thank Merlin, getting ready to head for dinner (they felt that there was safety in numbers). The other Slytherins took their cues from Blaise and soon the entire room was about to explode as everyone had their weapons up. Blaise strode forward and addressed his friends and enemies alike:

"Voldemort is invading us, and it's going to happen any minute.....you twelve will be much safer if you drop your wands right bloody now.....or the battle will kick off in here, and you'll lose very badly. Decide now." The seventh years, none of them hardcore, had no stomach for this fight and immediately laid down their wands, trusting Blaise not to harm them. They were soon joined by the three fifth year boys, who might have fought with better odds. Pansy and Millicent still had theirs up, even as Daphne and Tracey were collecting the other ten wands. They didn't have time for more of this crap, so Blaise looked at Theo and winked:

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" The two sixth year girls were knocked unconscious and slumped to the ground.

"Pick those two up and go into the seventh year boys' room, we're going to seal you inside and make sure that you can't harm anyone, once the battle is done, either way, you'll be let loose.....oh yeah, archers get moving. DA members report to Daphne and Tracey, first years come with me, now!" With no other wands lowered, Tony Caldwell and Ramsey Porter led their compatriots, dragging Parkinson and Bulstrode behind them, up to their dorm room. Blaise trusted that his friends knew what to do, and took off for upstairs, with the first years closely behind him.

Harry and company got to Dumbledore's office first, and tried the only password that he knew (Whatchamacallit), which thankfully worked. He led them quickly up the stairs, yelling:

“Dumbledore!” They got into the main office and found the entire faculty (other than Firenze) around Dumbledore’s desk, watching him speak with the floo head of Minister Fudge. Every head turned to look at Harry:

“Voldemort’s coming, he’s destroying Hogsmeade right now.” The Headmaster had a pained expression on his face as he addressed the kids.

“He just sent a force to destroy the Ministry, and they killed over ¾ of the workers there, including most of the Aurors.....Percy was leading them.” Harry briefly closed his eyes and thanked God that Ron wasn’t here right now, and was glad that he could not see the rank hatred on the faces of George and Fred.

“The Order is now helping the Aurors in Hogsmeade, they’re coming here next.....Now we have a plan ready to go, but I need all the cooperation I can get from you people.” The staff all nodded their heads, except for Dumbledore.....who’s reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Anthony and Justin, and their accompanying first years, who they just dropped off and sprinted back to their Common Rooms.

“I take it that it does not involve the wholesale evacuation of the students?”

“Not quite, just the first years. Minister Fudge if you don’t mind, I need the floo for a few minutes to get these kids to safety.....Dobby! Winky!” Fudge quickly left the floo as Winky popped in.

“Dobby, Winky, go to The Burrow and make it ready for some guests, please hurry.”

“Yes Harry, right now.” They both popped away and Harry lined up the first years, which now included the Slytherins, in front of the floo.

“Just say ‘The Burrow’ and get in there, it’s under Fidelius and no one will find you there, Dobby and Winky will take care of you.” One by one, the first years flooed off to safety, while they were doing this:

"Why not evacuate the students Harry? Are you willing to risk all their lives? Why?" Barely controlling his blinding rage that he had to explain himself to this man even now, Harry managed not to scream his reply:

"Because it has to end sometime, and now is as good a time as any. We have the castle as a defense, and a few nasty surprises in store for them.....and because we don't dare tuck tail and run and allow him to claim victory yet again, the line is bloody well going to be drawn here! No further!.....and it sounds like there is no one left to oppose him! Now we don't have any more seconds to lose here.....are you with us Headmaster?" Dumbledore knew that there was no other choice.....he sighed loudly, then proceeded to commit his life and the lives of 269 kids into the hands of Harry Potter:

"I'm with you Harry, what do you need us to do?"

"We have been gaming this out since the beginning of the school year, and we have a very detailed plan for castle defense, and you lot have been factored in. Professors Hill and Trelawney, go into the floo and protect the first years at The Burrow. Anyone who isn't in this room right now or has a red head that comes through that floo, attack them. Professors Shepherd and Sinistra, go to the Slytherin Common Room and report to Blaise Zabini, he will have your assignments. Likewise, Professors Flitwick, McDowell, and Vector, go to Anthony Goldstein in Ravenclaw; Professors McGonagall and Hagrid, go to Gryffindor and report to Ginny Weasley.....all of you, please leave now." The chosen teachers all left immediately, with Harry quickly praying that they did what they were told and didn't try to take over.....though it was really only McGonagall who might try. Soon there was just Sprout, Bliss, and Dumbledore in the room with Harry and his crew.

"How many Aurors are left alive and how soon can we count on them getting here?"

"The Minister said that there are about ten of them still alive and unhurt, your friend Travis Biller is one of them, they should be here any time now."

"OK then, where's Firenze?"

"We sent him to the Centaurs to warn them of a possible attack, he left about five minutes before you arrived."

"Will the centaurs assist us?"

"I would doubt it, even if they believe Firenze when he tells them, they will still prefer to remain aloof." Figures, thought Harry.

"Did you know about Hogsmeade before I told you?"

"No we didn't, nor did we know that they were coming here." Harry wondered at how much to believe that, but Bliss didn't seem to want to contradict him, so he bought it for now.

"Fair enough, now I have five guys outside right now making preparations near the front door, and Ron's in the air spying on what's going to be coming. Don't put the place into lockdown until they're all inside. Once they are, I want you three to go to Hufflepuff and help out there, they're by far the weakest House in Defense and they're going to need all the help they can get.....hang on a second.....Michael, how are you guys doing out there?"

Michael, Stephen, and their three pack mules were busy soaking the ground near the front doors with the juice.....which wasn't juice, but instead it was homemade napalm, a mixture of gasoline and detergent.....all of which was camouflaged by a No-Smell charm, so that anyone who stepped on it would only know that the ground was wet. All it would need was some fire at the right time, and Presto!

"We're almost ready Harry, two more minutes tops.....and I can see Ron coming back, or someone on a broom anyway. Wands out guys, just in case!" It was Ron though, and he rocketed down on Harry's broom and came to a screeching halt right in front of the main doors. Michael's mirror was still in hand, and Ron grabbed it.

"It's bad Harry, I counted over 400 Death Eaters, plus a few dozen trolls and giants.....and I didn't see them fighting anyone."

Meanwhile, back in Hogsmeade:

Moody and his unit of thirteen ran to the Shrieking Shack, where they managed to get the drop on the Stephen Jugson led Death Eater unit (thirty people) that had Kingsley Shacklebolt and five other Aurors severely pinned down behind the Shack itself, which was laden with so many spells and wards that it was virtually indestructible (given that Remus had not torn it apart during his transformations years ago). Moody and his people did not have the 'get out of Azkaban free' card that Harry did, and thus could not use Avada Kedavra (aside from ex-Auror Moody).....so they let fly with as many disabling curses that they could, not only stunners but cutting curses and even Reducto. They managed to cleave through two dozen Death Eaters before they were even noticed.....but once they were noticed, reinforcements came in from other Death Eater units and half the Order members were killed in less than five minutes.

Individually, the Aurors and most Order members were more than a match for the Death Eaters.....but they were outmanned fifteen to one, and the difference was soon evident. More Death Eaters than light wizards went down, some were even killed (Aurors had Avada Kedavra privileges by definition).....but after five more minutes the Aurors had collapsed under the weight of the attack, and only Kingsley remained alive, and he quickly Apparated away, presumably back to the Ministry. Moody was quickly losing his people too, and Fletcher and Diggle went down to killing curses, as well as seven other Order members.

Bill, along with Ashley and Tonks, led their unit to the Hogshead, but Bill's delay in instructing Fred and George cost them dearly, even if it couldn't be helped. By the time they got to the pub, all of the Aurors had succumbed to the sheer weight of numbers and were dead on the ground. Bill and company fought hard, but lost most of their troops inside a couple of minutes, as dozens of Avada Kedavras came their way. Soon it was just Bill, Ashley, and Tonks in one unit, and Moody, Charlie, and Peter Tyson in the other. Bill sent up red sparks into the air, and all six of them Disapparated back to Headquarters, eighty percent of their strength gone in only ten minutes of battle. What they didn't know, however, was that over seventy Death Eaters had fallen during the two missions, Hogsmeade

and the Ministry, and that would be significant strength not hitting Hogwarts in the coming minutes.

Back to Ron:

"They're all on their way here, Hogsmeade is now completely gone, not a building is left standing, they even managed to destroy the Shrieking Shack. We've got fifteen minutes tops before the first wave gets here."

"Are Michael and his guys done yet?" Ron looked over, and the five boys were shoving the re-shrunk cans back into the bags.

"Any second now, any word from Bill?" The Ravenclaws dashed inside, Ron right behind them, and before Harry could respond:

"We're inside, go to lockdown!" That wouldn't happen for a few seconds though, as Dumbledore's floo was firing again, and the six surviving non-Hogwarts Order members came tumbling in. During this communication, Bliss and Sprout had left for Hufflepuff House, Dumbledore only remaining behind because it takes one of the three senior members of the faculty to put the castle into lockdown (Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick). Dumbledore aged five years right in front of them just then:

"That's all of you that survived? Just six?" Moody, as usual, pulled no punches:

"Well there were over 400 of them Albus, we were a hair outnumbered.....and even my spells were just bouncing off the giants." Harry could sense Dumbledore's hesitation, and to an extent his shock at the Order being butchered so badly, however well that they had fought individually.....and even he had trouble with the kind of numbers that the twins, Ron, and now Moody were talking about, but they had to get past that now.

"Put the castle into lockdown sir, please now, we can't afford to wait any longer for the Aurors to come, they'll have to hit Voldemort's rear flank."

"You have no more students outside?"

"None that aren't supposed to be, and they have a way back inside. I'm sure Ron would have mentioned any stragglers." Speak of the devil, in came Ron.....at a full run.

"They're coming right up the main road, I didn't see any going into the forest at all."

"No other kids are out there Mr. Weasley?"

"I didn't see any, and I was looking on my way back for any.....why isn't the place in lockdown yet?" With everyone looking hard at him, the old man finally put his wand in a box lying on his desk and turned the wand several times:

Within two seconds, every window in the castle was magically sealed shut, the front doors were securely locked, as were the doors leading to the inner courtyard, all floo systems in the castle were immediately rendered useless, and unbreakable anti-portkey wards were put up. The only way inside now was a breaching of the front doors.....Winky, in eight months of exploring the castle for her blueprints, had not once found another way in.

"Headmaster, please go to Hufflepuff now, they should be getting ready to deploy any minute now." Dumbledore nodded and left the room. Harry, in his plans, had counted on more Order members surviving than this, and on Auror help as well.....but the plans had to change it seemed. The Order and the Aurors had been counted on to attack the Death Eaters' rear flank once the castle was breached.....but now?

"OK, it's down to us now, and I doubt we'll get much help. The Ministry was attacked at the same time as Hogsmeade and most of the Aurors are dead, as well as a lot of other Ministry personnel.....and the Ministry raid was led by Percy." Bill and Charlie reacted with nothing more than tightening of their facial expressions.....while Ron took the nearest foe glass and threw it into the wall, but that was all he did.

"Let's get back to Gryffindor and meet up with the others, we don't have much time left." The eleven of them left the office and ran back to Gryffindor Tower, where Harry's special five archers were awaiting.

Meanwhile, on the front two towers:

Dean and Lavender took the left side, while Seamus and Parvati took the right. Dean had the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, while the other two Houses were with Seamus: seventeen archers each, plus the two sixth years, crowded towers to be sure, but bristling with weapons. Their equipment was already up there, as it was put back there after every practice. There were enough arrows to launch twenty salvos from each archer.....not that Seamus or Dean thought that they would have time enough for that many shots. The towers were high enough in theory that spells shouldn't be able to reach them. Harry himself had tried one night a couple weeks earlier and had barely come close to hitting something, but with Voldemort they had to be prepared for anything. They got around the lockdown by simply removing the door manually from its hinges before the lockdown occurred.....if any Death Eaters showed up on brooms that was just too darn bad.

Parvati and Lavender were already scanning the main road with the omnioculars on full far-sight mode, but all they saw for the first few minutes was a blur in the distance.....but one that kept getting bigger and bigger as the seconds ticked on. The two older girls had both learned the rudiments of archery as well, and if worse came to worse, they could take up bows join the action. They kept special note of the 400 meter marker, the furthest one Harry had laid out, that would begin the countdown to firing, which would take place at the 100 meter mark.

The defense of the castle, in essence, was an overlapping series of ambushes, with planned retreats before the enemy got too close to the defensive positions. Harry, Ron, and Blaise, the main architects of the plan, were the students who knew the castle the best and had spent months going over little details. Unfortunately, it turned out that the twins had not had any success with duplicating the Marauders Map, and there was just the one.....and it was to held to by Harry, who would use the mirrors to direct his troops, while simultaneously

doing his own large share of the fighting. The idea was to kill or disable enough Death Eaters to allow Harry an unfettered shot at Voldemort, after which the mopping up should be rather easier.

All DA students were being instructed by their leaders to use Reducto as their prime offensive curse, and to hide behind hallway corner and use other physical shields as best they could. They were told not to take any unnecessary risks with their safety and to look to their leaders, all of them executive council members. Each House was split up into three groups: A, B, and C. The A groups, of about twenty students each, were mostly made up of the best Defense and Charms students, but not all of them. They would be the front echelon, and meet the attackers in the front hall. The B groups (containing about one quarter of the best Defense students), of about fifteen students apiece, were stationed along the staircases and at set points leading away from the main hall. They would cover the first planned retreats, and deploy the slowdown measures that Harry, Ron, and the others had come up with. The C groups were the last lines of defense, and were positioned around the four dormitories. These were mostly the weakest students in terms of fighting ability and, in a real military battle, were the students that Harry would have put up front, as cannon fodder of sorts, to wear down the enemy without losing his best soldiers.....but Harry knew that with kids, every life was precious, and he didn't dare expose most of these students without the enemy being seriously winnowed down.

Harry and his group went directly to the front entrance hall, where the A groups were waiting, led by Ginny, Anthony, Justin, and Blaise. The teachers were all with the A groups as well, as the five units: Gryffindor A, Ravenclaw A, Hufflepuff A, Slytherin A, and Harry's own unit (the Trio, the male Weasleys, and the rest of the non-Hogwarts Order people). They took up their positions, with Gryffindor A by the Great Hall entrance; Hufflepuff A by the staircase leading to the kitchens and their own Common Room; Slytherin A next to the other staircase, the one that led to the dungeons; Ravenclaw A was next to the entrance that led to the classrooms; and Harry and company were smack in the middle, in front of and on the main staircase leading to the first floor.

"Parvati, what's their progress, how much time do we have?"

"They're just entering the front gates Harry.....some creepy looking man is in front, it might be Voldemort. Here, you have a look." She put her mirror to the omnioculars and showed Harry the images.....it was him all right, striding right in between Narcissa and Peter Pettigrew, the only three people marching without Death Eater masks on.....even Draco and Percy must have had them on. He couldn't get an accurate count of the wizards, but saw the fighting trolls and giants flanking Voldemort in the front row, about three dozen of each it looked like.

"Ok Parvati, let me know when they get to the 400 meter mark." Harry thought about making a movie-like speech to his troops, but for the life of him he could not think of anything relevant to say. A couple of minutes passed, and Parvati was back on the mirror.

"They just passed the first marker Harry, 400 meters to go." He then did have something to say to his people, he activated his own mirror to say it to everyone listening.

"It's time folks, it's time to show Voldemort and his greedy morons that this is one place that they cannot run rampant! This is our home, and they are not bloody welcome here! Remember the plans, look to your leaders, and give the fight everything you can, and we will win!" This not being a movie, there was no mass cheering, just determined looks from both first years (archers Jones and Garcia) to old teachers (Flitwick and Dumbledore), and everyone in between.

"Three hundred meters."

"Dean, Seamus, are you guys ready?"

"Ready on the east tower Harry."

"We're set on the west mate."

"Two hundred meters." The Death Eaters were not seemingly in an hurry (nor should they have been really, with their main oppositions already taken care of at the Ministry.....or so they thought), so an agonizing thirty seconds passed by.

“One hundred meters.”

“Archers, get ready to fire.”

Thirty-four second years, plus Seamus and Dean fitted arrows to their bows and raised them in the air. Each of them had a quiver on their backs with nine more arrows, and a spare quiver right next to them. They were standing far enough back on the towers that they could not been seen from the ground below, only Parvati and Lavender were right up at the ramparts.

“Eighty meters.”

“Sixty meters.”

Harry counted to ten softly out loud, and then gave the command.

“Archers.....loose!” Thirty-six arrows twanged from their bows and flew majestically through the air.....and slammed into the first two rows of Voldemort’s troops.....

WHAM!

.....who were packed so closely together that every single arrow found a target, as no less than twenty wizards and six giants were nailed (some of them more than once).

Chaos ensued as the bad guys had no idea of what just hit them, and their first instinct was to look at the front door.....but it was still closed.....and just in time for the second salvo, which was delayed long enough for the girls to tell them that the aim was quite true. Dean had a pretty good idea of who Voldemort was now, and was specifically aiming for him.

WHAM!

More Death Eaters went down, and three of the giants that were already hit, got shafted again. There had been enough troops toward the back that were looking up, that the bad guys soon knew where

the arrows were coming from, and they were screaming this to Voldemort up front, who saw the third salvo coming right for him and threw up a physical shield from his wand.....which did block two arrows from impaling him in the chest. He couldn't retreat easily because of the crush behind him, and the other wizards in the front two rows put up solid shields as well, as Pettigrew started screaming for everyone to back up. They finally did so, but not until two more barrages fell down on them.....though these two firings did less and less damage, as more of the targets were either conjuring shields like their boss was, or in the case of a few of them, using their dead comrades for cover. Voldemort collected his senses for a second and then looked around.....but he didn't see Narcissa anywhere.

There is a good reason for that, she was lying on the ground right in the middle of the kill zone, with one arrow through the throat, and one through her midsection.....right where her unborn child was. She had told Voldemort the happy news a few weeks ago, and the potions that she had taken confirmed that it was a s boy that she was carrying. She had insisted on coming along for the final victory, and Voldemort had not seen any harm in it, not anticipating that Hogwarts would put up much of a fight.

He saw her up ahead, and motioned for two of his soldiers to go retrieve her. They were now out of effective arrow range, and there was a lot of muttering in the ranks about what they were going to do. It really was up to Voldemort alone to make the decisions though.....Pettigrew may be the second in command and be able to argue with his Master when it was just the two of them.....but it simply would not do for the troops to see Voldemort, the great and powerful one, ask for advice.

No arrows came down as Narcissa was brought back to her husband. He bent down to check her, and confirmed what he had already suspected: she was dead. Even if she hadn't been arrowed through the belly, the baby was far too young to be delivered, so the quest for an heir would have to begin anew after today. He looked up to the towers where the arrows had been coming from, but didn't see anyone up there. He pondered the distance to the front door (100 meters), took stock of how many arrows there were in the ground and

in bodies up ahead (there were over 150).....and without hinting at the rage he was feeling, gave the order:

"Crabbe, Goyle (the fathers of the would be assassins) take half the giants and trolls forward and breach that door as quickly as you can. The brats seem a bit more ready for us than we had thought. Go now."

The two large men started moving quickly forward, running this time, as the chosen giants and trolls followed as quickly as they could. They avoided most of barrage six, with only two trolls getting hit, and were soon at the front doors.

Up top, Dean and Seamus had loosed barrage six in the vain hope of nailing someone, but their kids weren't so well trained that they could hit people who were moving quickly, so the two hits they got (on an arm and a leg on two different trolls), were just lucky. Dean got on the mirror and put it on unicom

"Harry, the main force of Death Eaters has retreated beyond arrow range, but they just sent a force of about forty giants and trolls to the front door.....maybe you can hear them."

They could hear them, as Crabbe and Goyle Srs were using their wands as powerfully as they could, while their larger allies were beating at the doors with clubs and axes. Now the front doors were magically enhanced to withstand this kind of attack.....but only to a point. Harry now had the unenviable task of trying to decide whether to fire the juice now or not, or to wait until there were wizards up there.

"Can you guys hit them from there with the arrows?"

"Not really, the angle isn't too good from here, and it would totally expose us to counterfire. Lavender says she can see Voldemort eying us from where he's standing. I tried to hit him mate, and I did nail his shield twice.....but we did hit a blond woman that might have been Draco's mother." Harry smiled faintly at hearing that, rumor had gotten to him about the Voldemort/Narcissa marriage.

"How many dead do they have out there?"

"About fifty I would say, that's how many bodies are lying out there anyway. I have to assume that they left the dead ones behind, though they did go get Draco's mom after she was hit." That would leave 350 or so Death Eaters.....which would just about make the odds much closer to even than they were, with 245 students, a dozen professors, and six Order members. He put the mirror aside for a moment and looked at Ron, who asked the obvious.

"Do we fire the juice Harry?" He thought for a second as the hammering got louder.

"Dean, Seamus.....are you guys positive you can fire the juice if we wait for the main force of Death Eaters to get there? We can't afford to have it go to waste if you can't."

"We can do it Harry, I have a couple of arrows all set up to be done with Incendio.....all it needs is the Ravenclaw guys to have placed the juice correctly." Harry raised his eyebrow at Michael Corner (Stephen Cornfoot was with Ravenclaw B), who said:

"It was done just like we planned, it's right there.....the giants and trolls at the door now should have wet feet." Which gave Harry an idea that he whispered to Charlie and Moody, who nodded in agreement. He got on the mirror and Unicom.

"Don't fire the juice then, wait until the main force of Death Eaters gets there, then do it.....use your judgment as to when, I trust you." Plus he would be a hair busy.

"When the enemy comes through that door, as powerful a Reducto as you can yell. Ron, Neville, Bill and I have permission to use Avada Kedavra, so don't be alarmed if you hear it from our side. Gryffindors and Slytherins fire first, then Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, we want a continual stream of fire going right at them." Dumbledore aged another five years at hearing that piece of factoid (about the Avada Kedavra), but he knew instinctively that Harry was telling the truth, and now did not seem the proper time for a morality speech. The Headmaster had been remarkably quiet so far during the buildup, allowing Justin to place him without comment. He looked around at

his faculty, who aside from Hill, Trelawney, and Firenze, were all there waiting.....doing the bidding of Harry Potter and his trusted allies.....not one of whom was a teacher (he still didn't know about Shepherd and Bliss). The pounding got louder and louder, and some splintering could be heard.

Crabbe and Goyle, who were not even as smart as their sons, did not seem the least perplexed about being left alone to do their business, and join their large allies in attacking the doors furiously. After about five minutes the doors began to give way, and they could see only smoke through the door holes that they were of some fireworks that Ginny (closest to the door) had laid down. Once the holes started appearing, the demolition job got much easier, and within three more minutes the doors were completely battered to pieces, and the first of the enemy came into the castle.

REDUCTO!.....only fifty of them hit the first wave of the enemy.....and so much power being generated instantly killed every troll that came through the door, as well as Crabbe and Goyle, who were only human and never stood a chance when pummeled by a dozen Reductos all at once. The giants and trolls behind them pushed their way inside, and were slaughtered just as easily, there were so many defenders. Within seconds it seemed, all of the door breachers were laying dead on the ground. Harry grabbed Ron and they ran forward, quickly donning the robes and masks of the two dead Death Eaters, and at Harry's signal, walked outside and waved to the main Death Eater force to come forward, while inside, Bill and Moody collected the two wands on the ground, and House Elves were called on to collect the bodies (the House Elves would/could not fight, but they had volunteered for any other duties).

From the safe point, Voldemort could only see that there was no interference from above as his minions did their work on the door, even though it took an agonizingly long ten minutes to accomplish. Once the door was opened, he readied his troops for the charge.

"Go through the killing zone as fast as you can, do not think about being hit by one of those infernal arrows! We knew Potter was smart, and this is just confirmation of that. The old man won't allow Potter to direct the defenses inside the castle, and that fool has no imagination.

Once we're inside, we will take over the castle in a matter of minutes." He saw Crabbe and Goyle waving for them to come forward.

"Now move!" They began to march again, and soon began running. Parvati was immediately on the horn:

"Harry, they're coming again! They're running this time."

"Fire at will archers, fire at will! Dean, Seamus, once they pass twenty meters, fire the juice! All of you inside, get ready to be hot!"

This did not take long, a matter of seconds only, as the archers only got one round off before stuff started to happen. Dean and Seamus each had an arrow soaked in the juice itself ready to go, and they got an assist with Incendio from their respective girlfriends.....and then they each fired a short shot with their flaming arrows, right into the ground below.....thankfully missing any human targets this time.....

WHOOSH!

The ground around the front doors exploded into flame as the first wave of Death Eaters, giants, and trolls (all of the latter two groups that were left were up front) were incinerated instantly. The flames were twenty meters high, and were enough to make the archers all break out in a sweat, not to mention the invaders closest to the flames, as well as the defenders inside the castle. To his credit, Voldemort acted almost instantly, he used a spell to collect some of the fire.....and shot it right at the east tower.

Seamus and Parvati saw the fireballs coming and simultaneously screamed at their second years:

"Incoming! Get back inside!" The archers were near what was formerly the door anyway, and quickly scrambled inside and on to the staircase, with the two sixth years right behind them, shooting the fire hose spell out of there wands over their shoulders as they got inside unharmed, except for feeling some extreme heat. Dean and Lavender did the same things with their group, which was wise as fireballs soon

impacted their positions as well.....this was something they had vaguely planned for, or at least thought about, when Harry had told them about the idea for the juice.

Voldemort then instructed his front line Death Eaters to join him in a little wind spell:

WINDARIO!.....only to be met with a competing one led by Harry and Dumbledore. The flames strayed closer to the defenders than the attackers, and were quickly weakening the foundation around what were formerly the front doors.....and they began to crumble a little bit under the heat. After a few minutes of this the fire began to dissipate, but not before it opened up a wider hole for the invaders to come through.....and the first ones did, only to be met with a withering fire of Reducto, and five more arrows in an unpleasant surprise, which took out the brothers Lestrange, who were leading the first group inside.

Voldemort again adjusted, as some of his men again used dead bodies as shields with which to hide behind, and they began using the killing curse right away. Voldemort and Pettigrew began leveling the surrounding walls even more, to widen the breach and allow a breakup of the bottleneck that Potter had now trapped them in. They, along with some others, widen it again, this time five meters on each side.....and now the tide had turned, numbers-wise.

AVADA KEDAVRA!

Most of this volley was aimed a bit high, and sent quite a bit of the ceiling crashing toward the defenders, showering them with stone dust and little rocks, and killing eight students and two professors right away (Sprout and Vector). The light returned the salvo, but their Reductos and four Avada Kedavras only did minimal damage, killing just two and wounding ten more, as the Death Eaters had both powerful shields at their disposal, and now even more dead bodies to use as barricades.

“Retreat to position two, all groups retreat to position two!” The rear students in the A groups began to fall back, as the dodging skills of the front students and adults were getting quite the workout, though

two more were hit with the killing curse before they could all get away. The defenders retreated to their pre-planned positions, and were met by the leaders of the B groups (Stephen Cornfoot, Tracey Davis, Hannah Abbot, and Jack Sloper). Harry quickly took stock of who he had lost, and was saddened to see on the Map the names of, among others: Vector, Sprout, Morag MacDougall, and Scott Rosenberg (he of the saving Bliss in Hogsmeade notoriety). No one with a mirror had fallen, and everyone was under strict orders to Accio any mirror that was about to be left behind on a retreat, or otherwise captured.

Voldemort paused for a moment to regroup, and had noticed that there were five retreating groups.....

THWANG!

Using more courage than common sense, Xavier Jones and Daniel Garcia had snuck away from Harry and taken a quick potshot with their bows.....nailing two more Death Eaters, and missing Voldemort by not a whole lot. Jones and Garcia quickly ran back to Harry's position on the second floor, only to find that he hadn't even noticed that they had left.....and they chose wisely not to bring it up.

The bad man quickly split his team up into five groups, though interestingly enough, he chose not to go after Harry himself, instead following the Hufflepuff group.....which he had noticed included one Albus Dumbledore.....first things first, score settling-wise. Within five minutes, the groups were on their way.

Meanwhile, up on the towers, Dean and Seamus noticed that the invaders were now inside, and the main job of the archer brigade was now complete. Each of them turned to his charges, and in more or less the same words, said the following.

"Ok guys, there's nothing more we can do out here now.....and you guys kicked some serious butt today, we are so proud of everyone of you. Now Parvati/Lavender and I have to get back down to the fighting. You know the escape route, get on your brooms and head for Hogsmeade, then use the portkeys we gave you and go the Weasley's house and join the first years." This was done without complaint or question, and all of the second years left, except for

Sarah Owen and Audrey Wells (a second year Ravenclaw), who had already been designated to stay behind as lookouts, just in case. The four sixth years ran as fast as they could back downstairs, and Parvati and Seamus joined Gryffindor C (led by Colin until Seamus got there), and Dean and Lavender hooked up with Ravenclaw C (led by Mandy Brocklehurst).

The Voldemort led group quickly made up a lot of the ground on Hufflepuff A, and soon had it in full retreat, the students scrambling back to the ambush position that Hufflepuff B had prepared. Hufflepuff A was made up entirely of the best Defense students, other than the B and C leaders, but they were still much weaker than the other groups....and facing the strongest opposition with Voldemort and Pettigrew. Dumbledore and Bliss did their best to fight the rearguard, but it was difficult against opponents who were only using killing curses, nothing that could be blocked. Dumbledore did not use Avada Kedavra as a matter of principle, and while Bliss had special dispensation to use it in self-defense (as did all former Aurors who left the service in good standing), she was just one killing curse user against sixty.....and it cost her everything eventually. She was almost to the corner of the hallway when she was hit by Voldemort and Pettigrew simultaneously, both shots in the chest as she was taking aim at Voldemort herself. Dumbledore had made it around the corner, and then he heard a soft grunt come from his Defense teacher.....well, former Defense teacher now. Justin and Ernie were right there too, and Justin had the presence of mind to summon her body to them, and to grab her mirror, tossing it to Dumbledore. They retreated another ten meters to another corner, and Justin activated the portable swamp he had placed in the corridor, effectively blocking it and giving them more time.

The other four Death Eater groups were not having such an easy time of it, with Gryffindor A and Ravenclaw A pinning their opponents down in the now cramped hallways.....well cramped when you have sixty people attacking in such a relatively narrow space. They also made effective use of the portable swamps, and things were looking up in those directions. They lost no students or teachers, and managed to kill or disable ten of the attackers in each group, while losing little ground.

The hardest fight was between the Slytherins and the Death Eaters, who cliché as it was, were mostly former Slytherins themselves, and they fought very hard against kids they deemed to be traitors. Blaise and Theo led their troops well (Daphne was in charge of Slytherin C), and the result was a stalemate, during which the students did very well, killing or totally disabling eleven Death Eaters, at the cost of only two themselves.....but they were slowly being pushed back, and there was only so much more territory to go until they ran out. This was the problem for the student groups, in that they held the cost of their comrades lives so much higher than a normal military unit, and were loathe to lose even one student if retreating would buy them more time.

In theory, Harry's group should have been the most hard pressed, since there was no Harry B or Harry C to fall back on, there was just Harry, Neville, Tonks, Moody, Peter Tyson, and Bill, Ron, Charlie, George, Fred, and Ashley (Reynolds) Weasley, as well as the five archers.....fifteen against sixty, and the sixty were led by Bellatrix Lestrange and a masked figure that was in fact Draco Malfoy. But Harry's group made liberal use of Avada Kedavra by those legally able to fire it, and soon cleaved fifteen off of the Death Eater total, while losing none of their own.

"This is a special bulletin from the Wizarding Wireless Network! He Who Must Not Be Named has attacked three different targets within Great Britain during the last hour. The Ministry of Magic has been gutted, though Minister Fudge, Senior Undersecretary Diggory, and DMLE Head Bones are all reported to be safe. Hogsmeade has been completely leveled, all the buildings have been destroyed, and many of the people within the village have been killed. And now we have just gotten word that Hogwarts itself is now under assault by He Who Must Not Be Named and a very large force of Death Eaters, trolls, and giants. Word also has come to us from a Ministry source that Harry Potter himself, the Boy Who Lived, is leading the defense of the castle. We at the Wizarding Wireless Network will keep you apprised of events as they happen."

Manuel Zabini was in his office at Zabini Enterprises when he heard this on his WWN set. He leaned back in his swivel chair and contemplated the ceiling for a second as his nineteen year old twin

sons Henri and Pascal came running into the room, they had heard the same bulletin. Manuel gathered himself up inside and stood up.

"That's your brother in that castle and he's going to need our help.....and by Merlin he's going to get it too, let's go." The three Zabinis left the room and soon Apparated to the outer edge of Hogwarts, the closest point to the castle that one could Apparate to.

In the offices of The Quibbler, at roughly the same time, Joseph Lovegood had his WWN wireless on as well and heard the report. He left the building and did not tell anyone where he was going.

Similar scenes happened at about fifteen or so magical homes all over Great Britain, with wizards and witches, to a person all of them parents of Hogwarts students, deciding that their children needed them now more than ever.....all of them wizards except one family.

In the CEO's office of Gringotts, Traimax was poring over parchments that detailed projections for the summer months, when his son Freygang walked into the room. Freygang waited patiently by his father's desk until Traimax looked up and inquired as to what his son needed.

"It has begun father, the final battle amongst the wizards is now going on."

"Where?"

"Voldemort is now at the front doors of Hogwarts as we speak, he should be breaching them any second now." There had been much talk in goblin circles recently about Voldemort, and rumor had even reached them of his plans to assault Gringotts once Potter and Dumbledore were taken care of.....rumors that caused much mirth when talked about by most goblins, but Traimax was one of the few who took them seriously. The move he was about to make was not one that was sanctioned by the highest goblin councils (of which he was one of the most prominent members), and he knew that if it did not work out his life wouldn't be worth a Knut.....goblins accepted gambles only when they won.

"Are you and your troops prepared?"

"They are assembled and ready to depart on your order."

"Go then.....protect that boy Freygang, if Voldemort wins the entire magical world will fall into chaos, it will spread all over the world until we're all at each others throats.....and we cannot risk that, the muggles will eventually be brought in and will wipe us out.....protect that boy my son, he's the only one who can take out that lunatic."

"I will father." With that, Freygang went back to his own office and collected his own weaponry. He met his nineteen goblin security force in the main conference room, the best security goblins that Gringotts had on the payroll. They portkeyed away and found themselves at the outer gates of Hogwarts as planned.....but they were not alone.

By fortuitous chance, there were three groups of vastly disparate rescuers converging on Hogwarts, and they all met at the main gates:

The Aurors, what was left of them., had finally arrived. There were only nine of them there, and they did include Kingsley and Travis, and Travis' crew of Rob Graham and Sarah Westbrook. The other two living Aurors were involved in the cleanup at the Ministry, and were dealing with the dead bodies of over forty Ministry workers, as well as the dead Death Eaters. Whatever happened this day, the Ministry would be changed forever, and there would be a lot of new blood involved.

The parents, though not grouping up by design, had all arrived after quick decisions to help their children in the fight. They had all had their wands on them anyway, and it was simple to Apparate to Hogwarts. Their numbers were about thirty, and would help make up for the lack of Auror support.

The last group was the one that made the other two nervous: Freygang and his force of security goblins. Freygang was the head of security at Gringotts, and his procedures were many of the reasons that there had never been a successful robbery of the bank.....though heads had rolled, literally, when the vault that had

held Nicolas Flamel's Philosopher's Stone had been penetrated. He saw the nervous looks, but was beyond caring what any human thought of him and his kind.

Once all of them got their bearings from the journey, there were gasps from all of the humans as they saw the smoke coming from the front of the school, some of the fires were still going on, and it was enough to make the Aurors wonder out loud if the Muggle Repelling Charms would hide such smoke.

Freygang walked up to Kingsley, who he had dealings with from time to time.

"Well Shacklebolt, we meet again. We are here to help the Potter lad in any way we can."

"So the goblins are taking a side? I thought you didn't do that."

"We represent Gringotts in this matter, not the goblin race as a whole.....but there will be time to debate this later.....those kids will be needing us now."

There was general agreement about this, needless to say, and the fifty-nine 'being' group made the walk through the gates, and some of the parents were hard pressed not to run up to the doors.....but did not after a warning from Biller, who of course knew all about the archers.

"Careful folks, keep in formation here, we don't know what kind of rearguard Voldemort left behind, and we don't know if Harry has any booby-traps out here that weren't set off.....and he also had people on the towers, as you're about to find out."

Once they curled around the lake and came within sight of the front doors, they certainly did find out. They first noticed that there was no rearguard.....and then they saw the dead bodies strewn all over the ground in the arrow kill zone, with said arrows still sticking out of their bodies. The masks, for the most part, were still on the bodies.....and no one there had much inclination to remove them. They counted about seventy bodies and Travis instinctively looked up

to the towers, where he thought he saw a movement on one of them, maybe Harry had left someone behind as a watcher. Kingsley knelt by the body of Narcissa Black Riddle and confirmed that she was dead.

“What the hell was this?”

“The archers, Harry’s had them training for a few months now. They were on the front two towers.....second year kids who he didn’t want to put into the main battle.” This brought Kingsley up short, he hadn’t known about the archer plan, as Bill and Moody had kept that between themselves (and the other Weasleys of course). While they were talking about this, Freygang and his goblins were methodically beheading every dead Death Eater, after first checking to make sure it was actually an adult in the mask. The parents were all staring aghast at this, while the Aurors all thought this made perfect sense and were collecting any stray wands that were laying around. Freygang looked contemptuously on the parents:

“Just making sure, we don’t want any surprises coming back on us.” Biller nodded at him, and resumed his watch of the towers, waving his arms around trying to get some attention.

Up on the east tower, Sarah Owen was using her mirror to contact a very busy Boy Who Lived:

“Harry, we’ve got a large force approaching the castle.....some are wearing Auror robes, and there are some goblins as well. One of the Aurors is waving his arms around at me, should I check it out?”

“Point your mirror that way Sarah, let me have a look.” She put her omnioculars up to the mirror and showed Harry what she was talking about. He saw his mentor immediately, and Kingsley too.

“They’re on our side Sarah, get down to them and let me talk to them, give your mirror to Travis Biller.” She hopped on her broom and flew down to the newcomers.....all of whom had their wands out (except the goblins), but put them down once they saw it was a thirteen year old girl approaching them.

“Which one of you is Travis Biller?”

“I am.”

“I’m to give you this.” She handed the mirror to Travis (who did have one to communicate with Harry, but it had been destroyed in the Battle of the Ministry).

“Harry, what’s going on?”

“We’re split up into our five groups as planned, we’ve sustained some losses, but we’re hurting them a lot more.....how many people do you have with you?”

“Nine Aurors, thirty or so Hogwarts parents.....and twenty goblins.”

“What? Goblins? I thought they were neutral in all this?”

Freygang took the mirror from Biller and addressed Harry, whom he had seen many times, but never met.

“I am Freygang, son of Traimax, I have twenty security goblins at your command, tell us where you wish us to deploy.” Hearing that this goblin was Traimax’s son certainly got people’s attention, as all the parents looked on the goblins with a new respect.

“Travis, take half the humans and half the goblins and move them toward Hufflepuff’s Common Room, they’re almost in full retreat and we’ve already lost Sprout and Bliss from there, and that’s where Voldemort is.....bugger, they’re coming forward again, Ron, Neville.....AVADA KEDAVRA! Slytherin A and B, they’re making another run at you, retreat to position three!”

The parents and Aurors alike listened to this with a kind of horrified fascination, yet at the same time with a sense of relief in that Harry seemed to at least have a plan.

"Freygang, you take the rest of them and go toward the dungeons, the Slytherins are stalemated for the most part, but they're being pushed back and they have less room to retreat to than the others."

"It will be as you say Harry Potter." Freygang spoke some Gobbledeygook to half his force, and those ten moved over to Travis, who looked toward Sarah Owen.

"You mind if I keep this?"

"No problem, I'll just go to the other tower and keep watch there, we have another girl up there." With that, the young Gryffindor got back on her broom and flew to the west tower to join Audrey. Travis arbitrarily separated half the humans and Aurors, and set off toward Hufflepuff with them. The others, who included Joe Lovegood and all three Zabinis, looked toward Freygang, who also moved inside.....but not before detailing two more goblins to remain behind to 'take care' of the bodies.

Ravenclaw was still doing the best of the five groups, due mainly to having the least of the competition, facing the Death Eater units that would have been led by the Lestrange brothers had they not been perforated. Soon enough they had the Death Eaters down to thirty who were uninjured, and five more who were lying on the ground with various leg injuries (some of the Ravenclaws were aiming a bit low). Anthony, not Luna, was in charge, and he chose a daring strategy.....though less daring now that they had numerical advantage over their attackers:

"Stop firing, let them come a bit closer and we can take more of them out at one time.....Ravenclaw C, come forward and join us, move." The C unit, which had fifteen kids in it, moved down from the area around their Common Room and joined the others, putting their numbers at an even fifty.....and who hadn't fired a spell since Anthony's order. The Death Eaters, now led by Stephen Jugson, assumed that there was another retreat being planned, and began moving forward slowly up the staircase, leaving their wounded behind to guard their own rear. They got up the stairs and eased around the corner, only to see it be empty, the kids must have retreated even further.....maybe they were doing more damage to the brat than

they had thought.....though not really, as they found out when the bulk of their force was in the hallway.....

Anthony, Luna, and eight others were under Disillusionment Spells and removed them by firing ten very close range Reducto spells, all at heads and all making perfect contact.....and taking out Jugson as well in the bargain. The remaining Death Eaters reacted as best they could, but didn't manage to kill any of the ten students before they retreated behind the next corner. The bad guys knew that retreating was not an option for them, and they thought that one more good push might break these kids.....so they charged around the corner.....to be met by another swamp being activated under them, sticking a dozen of them in place long enough to be killed.

Now Anthony was ready to go on the offensive, but first he sent Luna and four others under more Disillusionment Charms to get behind the eight remaining Death Eaters.....which they successfully did, going back down the stairs very quietly, and quickly dispatching the wounded Death Eaters who had remained behind. They doubled back upstairs.....but it was too late for them to do anything, as Anthony had gotten a bit impatient and rushed the last eight of the enemy, killing all eight while losing just one of his own.

Anthony desperately wanted to give his people a rest, but knew that the other groups would need their strength.

"Harry, this is Ravenclaw A, B, and C, our opposition is gone, we've taken them all out with no prisoners, what do you want us to do?"

"Send a third of them down to Hufflepuff under Luna, take the rest to Gryffindor yourself and relieve the pressure on Ginny, they're getting bogged down."

Luna and her group were already on the move, and Anthony followed down with the rest.

In the dungeons, the Frederick Nott led Death Eaters had pushed back his son and friends all the way to the Potions classroom, though at a terrible cost, losing half his strength.....which was soon reduced even more by the following two occurrences:

Blaise was one of the ones who had helped make up the juice (they acquired the detergent through him), and he had sequestered a couple of canisters of it for himself without Harry knowing. He sent one of the third years back into the Common Room to get it (perversely he hid it right next to the fireplace, which due to the warm weather was not in use), and they soaked one of the corridors with the juice.....and waited for the enemy to round the corner. They did, assuming that the wet floor was from blood, and a dozen of them got into the hallway when Blaise lit up:

Incendio!

The dozen Death Eaters became instant candles, as Blaise and several others came around the corner and fired off more:

Incendio! Incendio! Incendio! Incendio! Incendio!

Which negated the effect of the hose charms that the elder Nott and the rest of his bad people were using, water not working as well in a gasoline fire as on regular flames. Their difficulty was compounded by Freygang and the Zabinis, who led their group at a run and cut down everyone else with a brace of stunners and some nifty knife work by the goblins. Soon the enemy was done, seven of them left alive, including Frederick Nott, who was bleeding profusely from both legs and his chest (knife wounds), but was still alive long enough to see his son come up to him.

“Do you still think I chose the wrong side father?”

“This is not over, our Master will still be triumphant.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry father, you’ve lived your life for the wrong purpose. I’m on the right side.....and the winning side.....I don’t really think that’s a coincidence.” The elder Nott turned his head away.

“Let me die in peace you ungrateful brat, just go.” Theo still had a slight bit of conscience for his father:

## Stupefy

Frederick Nott drew his last breath a couple of minutes later, as no medical attention was given to the Death Eaters who were injured.....though they weren't injured for long, as the goblins again secured the rear by making sure that there was no one alive to come back at them. The severed heads would make nice trophies for their collections.

"Harry, this is Slytherins A, B, and C.....and friends. The Death Eaters down here have all been wiped out, we lost seven kids and Professor Sinistra in the defense.....what do you want us to do?"

"Come up here and help my unit, the Death Eaters aren't attacking anymore, and I don't have enough people to make a full assault on them yet. Come up behind them and distract them long enough for us to make a push. We're next to the Headmaster's Office now, and I doubt we'll need to retreat anymore."

Meanwhile, while Ravenclaw and Slytherin were attending to business, Hufflepuff had fallen all the way back to its Common Room, and had already lost fourteen kids from the Death Eater onslaught, and most of their best fighters. Wayne Hopkins and Kevin Whitby were cut down by Voldemort himself, and Megan Jones had been badly injured by a piece of wall that fell on her left hip.....then the parents and goblins crashed into Voldemort's rear, and the fight took a turn. Voldemort had not had to exert himself like this in many a year, and when he had time to think about it, gained even more respect for Potter, who had clearly been thinking about this for quite awhile, probably even longer than Voldemort himself had. He did not have the luxury of the mirrors, or rather the foresight, so he had no clue about how his other troops were doing. In an ideal battle, he would have kept them all in one large group and picked off the five Hogwarts groups in place, but the nature of the castle rendered that idea impractical. The Death Eaters still gave much better than they got, the only Dark unit that could say that.

Voldemort was feeling the most pressure on his rear flank, and he directed his troops to collapse the ceiling above them and block the hallway, which they did in spectacular fashion, cutting off the parents

and goblins behind them, who immediately began trying to reduce the rubble in front of them, as Voldemort advanced forward.

“Dumbledore! Show yourself and duel me and I will not harm any more of your precious students.....refuse and they will all die today, I will show them no mercy!”

This was done without Sonorus, but Dumbledore heard every word and started to walk toward his old foe. Justin quickly grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Just where the hell do you think you’re going Headmaster?”

“To stop this Justin, we’ve lost too many students already.”

“Are you out of your bloody mind? We’re slaughtering them everywhere else in the castle in case you haven’t noticed.....and do you really think that Voldemort will just stop killing today if he gets you? Are you that naïve?” Dumbledore ignored the disrespectful tone and the implied insults, and just smiled at his student.

“You are a very brave young man, a credit to Hufflepuff House. Let go Justin, we all do what we must.” Justin gave up and let go of the old man’s robes, after first snatching the mirror back. Dumbledore strode out into the hallway, and the Death Eaters let him come out unmolested.....though there were two that were invisible to Dumbledore’s eyes.

“I’m here Tom, for our final time together.” Voldemort walked up to him and looked his ancient enemy over.

“You look haggard Dumbledore, I guess war doesn’t agree with you so much. I wonder where your erstwhile protégé Potter might be right now? Probably too far away to save your sorry skin.”

“From what I gather, he’s too busy killing your Death Eaters, you’re losing badly all over the castle. Surrender Tom, you can’t win here.”

"Once I kill Potter, the defenses will collapse, and at the very least I'll be able to make my escape.....and with you and Potter both gone, the light side will fall into shadow."

"You will have a hard enough time killing me Tom, I will make sure that you have little left to fight Harry with."

"I don't think so old man, killing you won't tax me in the slightest." That was their cue, and Pettigrew and Percy removed the Disillusionment Charms from themselves and attacked Albus Dumbledore from behind.

Reducto! Percussio!

Full in the back from one meter away, shattering every vertebrae inside the spine of Dumbledore, paralyzing him.

"You see Albus, I need to save my energy for Potter, like you said.....but I wasn't the one stupid enough to walk out here alone was I? Goodbye Albus, for what it's worth you were a great Transfiguration Professor." He then used Reducto on Dumbledore's throat, breaking his windpipe. Dumbledore died within seconds as he choked to death, a living legend who was now just a legend.

On the other side of the castle, McGonagall felt a surge into her body, as the castle acknowledged her as the new Headmistress, and added to her magical power thus. She knew what this feeling represented, Dumbledore had explained it to her, and it saddened her greatly, so much so that she left the front line of the Gryffindor attack and walked to the rear to collect herself. Her feeling was confirmed a few seconds later when Justin got on the horn.

"Dumbledore's dead folks, Voldemort killed him just now." He didn't give any details over the mirrors, not wanting any of the kids to hear any gory details. Voldemort was now regrouping for a time, and had more of his troops take down more of the ceiling on the other side, while he and a few others spent some time sealing up the Hufflepuff Common Room, trapping the students inside there (all the teachers assigned to them had by now been killed). He could hear the re-

enforcements breaking through his rubble barrier, and got his troops ready.

By now, Gryffindor, with the help of the Anthony led Ravenclaws, had managed to wipe out their opponents, who had been led by Anton Dolohov and Walden MacNair, though the Death Eaters had put up a hard fight. The Gryffindors, who person for person were the best fighters in the school, had only lost two students in total, though they were two students more than anyone had wanted have killed of course. Harry had them deploy to Hufflepuff as well, he knew that that's where it would come to eventually.

For now though, he had his own unit to worry about. He took stock of his own situation, he had not lost anyone just yet, and he estimated that Bella's force was down to thirty-three. After an interminable wait (which in reality was only a couple of minutes), Blaise was back on the mirror.

"We're in position Harry, we're close to their rearguard position, and they know that we're here."

"Freygang, how close can your guys get to them without getting nailed?"

"Close enough to take out a few of them before they know we're there, but nothing too sustained, I only have ten of us here, the rest are with your friend Biller."

"That is just what I want, get up there and kill at least three or four of them, then quick retreat.....and then taunt them a little bit. Bellatrix Lestrange is in charge over there, and she might respond to something like that.....all we need is a diversion, and we'll attack from our side."

Freygang motioned for his goblins to follow him, and they snuck around the corner.....and beheaded five Death Eaters that were not paying close enough attention to their rear duties. They retreated behind the corner, satisfied smiles on their faces. Biller appreciated this skillful demonstration, and added his own personal touch to the festivities, as he and a few others came up to the corner, and

levitated the heads.....and then banished them straight at Bella and Draco (who had by now removed his hood and mask). To say that the two evil folk were surprised.....well let's just say that they didn't appreciate the gesture. Bella sent half a dozen Death Eaters back to recon and see what was behind them.....their screams could soon be heard all over this part of the castle as the goblins did some experimenting on them. The Death Eaters had just lost 1/3 of their force in just a couple minutes time.

While they were so distracted, Harry did his own sneaking up, in Ron's Invisibility Cloak (he hadn't carried his own with him), and soon the place was exploding with fireworks, blinding everyone but Harry, who finally got to use his knives as he hacked and slashed away, not waiting for Ron and the others to come up and join him.....though they did within seconds, and found that Harry had sliced and diced his way to eight Death Eater fatalities. They couldn't use Avada Kedavra or Reducto with Harry in there like a whirling dervish, so Stupefy was the order from Ron, and the entire unit slammed into the front of Bella's Death Eaters, with Harry in the middle and the goblins and friends in the rear. It was a rout, as Bella was too busy dodging to properly aim a spell.....though Draco managed to, killing Moody before being overcome with stunners from the twins. Harry himself had been grazed by two stunners, and was lying the ground exhausted, blood dripping from his two fighting knives (he had a spare in his robes as well), and the battle was over quickly, with ten prisoners this time, including Bella and her favorite nephew.

Freygang walked up to Harry and lifted him rather easily to his feet.

"Father was not kidding about you Harry Potter, that was some very impressive knife work.....your muggle teacher would be very proud of you right now." Harry had long since given up wondering how the goblins knew everything about him, even something as secret as this, and he took the compliment as face value.

"Your help was invaluable Freygang, thank you."

"It was our pleasure." The bloodthirsty smile on the goblin's face gave truth to that statement. Harry looked at Bill:

"Are we taking prisoners today? None of the other groups seem to be doing it."

"They wouldn't be so kind to us Harry, I say we let Freygang and his boys have some trophies.....or would that be some 'more' trophies, eh Freygang?" Bill knew the goblin quite well from his own work at Gringotts.

"We can never have too many trophies, Bill Weasley. I will leave Lestrange and Malfoy to your good offices, while we take our prizes from the rest." And they did just that, leaving Harry and Bill to deal with the two leaders. Harry knew that they had to hurry a bit, Merlin only knew what Voldemort was doing right now at Hufflepuff.....but he had a sense that the castle defense could now be called a success, with only one Death Eater group still to be dealt with.

"Justin, what's the situation up there?"

"Voldemort has sealed us in the Common Room, I have most of my kids ready to go, but we can't get out of the room." This was a problem, but nothing could be done about it until he got there.

"I'll figure something out when I get there, Voldemort and his pocket are the only Death Eaters left. I'll call you when we reach you, just be ready." He had a thought and found where Neville was standing.

"Neville, could you come over here please?" He motioned for Neville to come and talk with him and Bill privately.

Neville walked over and saw Bella lying there, still unconscious. He had told Harry on Snape night that no small part of him wished that it could be a Lestrange being tortured instead of the grease ball that they were working on, and Harry could fully sympathize.....which is why he did this:

"Neville, if you want some private time with her....." Neville looked like he had just found an extra Christmas present under the tree.

"Do we have time for that?"

"No, we'll stash her in Dumbledore's office and you'll retrieve her when the lockdown is finished, put her in a trunk or something, we'll figure it out."

"I want this Harry, yes. Thank you."

"You've earned it.....and your parents earned it. I'm only sorry that the brothers Lestrange were skewered before, they could join her. Now get her in there and get back here quick, we need to go." Neville did just that, using Mobilicorpus and transporting her into Dumbledore's office, where he laid her right down on the desk.....after making sure he had her wand and securing her with what seemed to be a kilometer of magical rope.....and a couple more stunners for good measure. He came back down to see Ron and Harry having a chat with a now conscious Draco.

"Hi there Draco, you remember us? Pothead and the Weasel I believe were your nicknames for us."

Draco responded with a string of expletives that are unfit for most readers to have to use their eyes on.

"Now, now, that was not nice Draco. Now we would love to stay and chat with you ferret, and find out especially what it was like to be Voldemort's stepson.....but we have to go kill your other dad, just like our archers killed your mother." Ron loved the look that this last comment got, and it wasn't something he would have said to anyone else.

"At least she lived longer than your pathetic mother Weasel!"

"And we will live longer than you will Drackie.....well enough is enough. Xavier, Daniel, let Ron and me borrow your bows for a second." The two first years handed over the equipment, and their leaders drew back their arrows (Ron had seen enough movies to figure it out quickly enough).

"Goodbye Draco, say hi to your mom and dad for us." Harry and Ron fired their arrows at the same time, and from a distance of just a meter, killing him in a flash. Everyone was looking at them with stony

expressions, there had been so much killing that no one could really take any satisfaction it any longer. They handed the bows back, and Harry addressed them all:

"All right folks, the entertainment is over, on to Hufflepuff so that we can finish this thing." He led the way down the stairs, toward the end of it all.

Luna and Anthony had begun to make progress in getting rid of the rubble that was separating them and Voldemort's last group, but they were slowed considerably by the Death Eaters sticking their wands through any holes and firing off killing curses, which did hit two people before they wised up and started dismantling from afar.....which drew it out, and allowed Voldemort some peace and quiet with which to draw up a plan.

He knew that Potter was coming soon, and the lack of help that he himself was getting gave truth the Dumbledore's words that his people were likely losing pretty badly. He had to admire the plan that Harry came up with, but couldn't get past his feeling that with Potter gone, everything else would fall into place.....and he knew that he could win a duel with Potter, who if he had been as busy killing as Dumbledore had claimed, would be pretty tired.....plus Voldemort knew that he had his ace-in-the-hole right in his right pocket. What he had to do was demoralize the lad some more, break his spirit.....and the solution was right there on the other side of the rubble. He went up to the men he had stationed there, who were randomly firing at the other side.

"Cease firing now, and when the pile is gone, make sure you herd Lovegood to me, I want to deal with her myself." The Death Eaters thinking was that this was a bit harebrained, didn't they want to kill everyone they could ahead of time?.....they didn't say this though of course, and they did obey. Ruptures in the pile began to appear, done by the long distance Reducto spells used from the other side, mostly on the top. Once the pile was down to just under two meters, Voldemort stationed his troops right in front, and stood up there himself.

"Only fire on my command, let them get closer."

"Yes Master."

The Hogwarts people had noted the lack of firing now, and moved closer to the rubble pile.....and this was a key place where another copy of the Map would have come in handy.....they would have noticed that Voldemort was directly on the other side, and he was carefully moving the rubble in front of him.

Luna and Anthony led the mass of students behind them, and got within three meters of the pile when it came.....the Death Eaters on each side of their Master pushed the rocks down and Voldemort targeted his prize:

Accio Luna Lovegood!

Luna found herself flying over the rubble, and as soon as she landed was hit with the most pain she had ever experienced, courtesy of Cruciatus.....from Pettigrew and Percy, who were soon joined by their boss as they tortured Luna harshly. The other Death Eaters opened up on the rest, killing Terry Boot and Stephen Cornfoot right away, and killing Liz Mullane and Marietta Edgecombe in the second volley. The Ravenclaws were forced to retreat again, but eventually got the rubble down to where it didn't act as a protective wall for the Death Eaters.....this did not help Luna at all though. She was put under Cruciatus for five minutes, by three people, before Voldemort decided to save his energy again, and that of his two lieutenants. Luna was unconscious, but he spoke to her anyway:

"Don't worry Lovegood, Potter will be joining you soon enough." With that, he lazily drew his wand back:

Avada Kedavra!

Luna stopped twitching, and was now dead.

The reinforcements arrived just two minutes later, and Anthony was forced to tell Harry and Joe that Luna had been taken (Harry had not been paying too close of attention to the Map on the journey over).

Harry looked up only to hear Voldemort's Sonorus voice taunting him from around the corner:

"Oh Potter! I have just had the pleasure of killing another one that you love.....are there any left? Or shall we just deal with each other now?" Ron and Neville reacted first, and whipped around the corner firing killing curses, catching the Death Eaters somewhat off guard. They were followed immediately by the rest of Harry's unit and soon the air was filled again with killing curses and Reductos.....and the light side forces gave into their hate and let it pour out of them. Harry briefly squeezed the shoulder of a weeping Joe Lovegood as he joined his friends

The Death Eaters had no choice but to fall back as they lost half their numbers in less than a minute, and Harry was at the front as he killed as many of them as he could.....indeed the Hogwarts people had so many spells in the air that none of the Death Eaters got any more kills.....and some spells even collided in mid-air, which did injure Ginny and Katie slightly. Once they climbed over what was left of the ceiling, they found only ten Death Eaters left.....three of whom included Percy, Pettigrew, and He Who Must Not Be Named.

Harry looked at the body of Luna lying on the ground and without thinking, rocketed forward, his wand out.....but so was Voldemort's, and at the same time they both screamed:

AVADA KEDAVRA!

End chapter

Author's Note: Yes I killed off Luna, and that took quite a few people by surprise, though it really shouldn't have. I'll admit that I didn't telegraph it, but it's still very much in character for my 'anything goes' strategy for this story. I've acknowledged before that I never really knew what to do with Luna, and I would have found something except that I just flat out ran out of time. This will be a 305,000 word story (written in six and a half months), and I just didn't have time to flesh out characters the way I would have if I had given myself longer, with an earlier starting time. For those who complain that I kill off too many canon characters: grow up, there's been a reason for every one of the deaths, and there are plenty of characters left to write about if I had wanted to write a sequel (which I don't). Thirty-seven students, four teachers, and Dumbledore died on the light side, to almost 500 Death Eaters and three dozen each of giants and trolls.....if anything I made the Hogwarts losses too light.

The cliffhanger? Well part of it is that I had a rough time getting Chapter 34 finished on time, and part of it was that I wanted people to have a reason to read this chapter, which is mostly aftermath and epilogue. I haven't gone to the cliffhanger well that many times, and I liked it as an ending point to the chapter.

Monday, June 1st, 1997 (continued)

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

The killing curses hit each other, and what transpired next was something that had long been talked about within Harry's circle, but had never been seen by anyone besides the two antagonists:

Priori Incantatem

The fact that the two wands were brothers was well known.....especially to Harry and Voldemort, neither of whom would have looked surprised if there hadn't been such expressions of rank hatred on their faces. The remaining Death Eaters were quickly subdued.....and before anyone could stop them (even if they had wanted to), the goblins felt free to butcher all the live ones except for Percy and Peter Pettigrew. The trophy-hungering goblins, however, were the only ones not paying full attention to the final duel.

The circle appeared, and even in such a relatively confined space (the hallway), it seemed to be huge.....and like the time in the graveyard, past victims of the wands came floating out of them.....starting with Luna, and seeing her almost broke Harry's spirit right there. She looked a little confused at what was happening, but her brain took over.

"So that is what happened.....you can do it Harry, you can win." She floated past him and continued on toward Voldemort, and while what she whispered to him would always remain unknown, the expression on his face was very telling.

Dumbledore was next to come out of Voldemort's wand, and the old man seemed more at peace in death than he had seemed in life this past year.

"You are ready now Harry, end this once and for all." He moved on as well, smiling gently at the awestruck crowd that was constantly jockeying for a better view. Other students came out of Voldemort's wand as well, and they circled the two as the others did.

Harry's wand had claimed more than it's share of victims this day, and the Death Eaters he had killed came out of his wand, and whispered their own words of encouragement to Voldemort, while hissing vile threats and promises to Harry, mostly on what they would do to him once he reached the afterlife.....and they assured him it would be soon.

It was not long before a familiar face came out of Harry's wand.....that of Severus Snape, which drew a sharp intake of breath from everyone who could see.....even those who knew how he had died. He looked at Harry with a strangely smug smile (strangely, considering he was dead and all).

"Die Potter, die slowly."

Harry was focusing all his energy on keeping the connection going.....he wanted to see his mother and father come out, like the last time. It did not take too long either, Voldemort apparently had

not been too busy in the killing business over the last two years, and right after Cedric, James and Lily Potter streamed out of the bad man's wand just a couple of minutes into the connection.....and though this is what he had longed to see, it was more than Harry could bear and he started weeping.....but somehow managed to keep himself under control long enough to put his left hand in his robes and whip out Snape's wand.....but not before his foe saw this and had a counter of his own: Dumbledore's wand. Out they both whipped, and the scene from three minutes ago repeated itself.

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

And you know the funny thing that happened? Priori Incantatem.....the relationship between Snape and Dumbledore had another of its complexities revealed, as their wands were brothers as well. This development rocked both of them hard, as Voldemort had not expected Harry to be using that particular wand.....and Harry just couldn't believe it period.

Death Eaters crawled out of Dumbledore's wand, as before, and they joined the procession that was still circling around Harry and Voldemort, though surprisingly there weren't that many of them, and none from before this day, as the permanently retired Headmaster had not killed anyone in years before this (he had done millions of spells since, so Grindewald did not come out).....but what shattered every Weasley (even Percy) in the room.....

Molly, Arthur, and Remus came out of Snape's wand

"Hang on Harry dear, you can do it."

"It's yours my boy, end it."

"We're so proud of you Harry, finish it."

With hearing all that, and seeing the ghostly forms of so many of his loved ones, Harry lost what little composure he had left:

"I hate you Voldemort! I will kill you if it takes my last breath! I hate you!" The walls began to shake slightly as the magical energy poured

out of Harry, and though he was not using Sonorus, his words echoed in the hallway as if he had been using it. He focused all his pain, his rage, and his power on forcing his killing curses forward.....and slowly forward they did go, the two were only separated by five meters to begin with and the gap was closing inexorably. Molly and Arthur had somehow stopped inside the circle, and were gazing fondly on their children, so many of whom had saved the light side from destruction this day.....and all of whom were crying uncontrollably.

Voldemort didn't know whether to crap or go blind at this point, even he had not known about Snape's and Dumbledore's wands being brothers like this, and he thought that he knew everything there was to know about his former henchman. He watched the spells coming toward him, saw that he was truly alone and surely defeated.....and decided that plan C was going to have to be used.....at least Potter would die because of it:

He wrenched free of the double wand mating (which cased the ghosts to all instantly disappear) and somehow avoided getting hit with Harry's two killing curses.....he then dropped his own wand on the ground and reached into his robes for another weapon and pulled it out:

It was a 9 millimeter Baretta pistol.

Harry was already halfway through another round of Avada Kedavra when he saw the gun come out, he immediately stopped speaking the spell and began his focus on what to do next:

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three shots fired off in quick succession, but hitting nothing but the wall at the end of the hallway, as Harry Apparated himself just perfectly, directly behind Voldemort. He quickly dropped his wands and drew his fighting knives.....and plunged them right into his enemy's back as hard as he could, forcing him to drop Dumbledore's wand and his handgun to the floor. There was a loud gasp from Voldemort as the knives penetrated his lungs, and Harry yelled out right in his ear:

"I bet you didn't know that power did you?" With that, he withdrew the knives from Voldemort's back, and plunged them into his neck, killing him immediately.....but Harry held them in there, screaming:

"For mum, for dad, Luna, Molly, Arthur, Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, Cedric....." He kept repeating these names as he pushed as hard as he could, and though in his mind he knew his foe was gone, he couldn't bring himself to let go.

Neville and Ron were standing next to each other, transfixed, and each wondered if they should do something here, or just allow Harry to let it go in whatever fashion he needed.....but they could see Harry cracking now under the strain, as the anguish and grief poured out of him, and without looking at each other they walked over to their best friend and talked him down very gently.

"Harry, c'mon mate, it's done now, let go Harry."

"Harry, please stop now, you've won, you did what you had to, it's over."

They kept repeating this very softly, and soon Harry stopped his screaming and pulled his knives out of Voldemort, who slumped down on the floor, very dead. Bill walked over and checked the body, and no one saw any spirits or ghosts come out of it.....so the deed was now done.

Neville and Ron very carefully each took a knife out of Harry's hand and put their arms around him, holding on to him as he stood there, cried out, but too tired to move. He looked over and saw Peter Pettigrew tied up against the wall, but while this, in theory, was now the death he most wanted in the world, he couldn't bring himself to care right now.....and Pettigrew was more than smart enough to keep his mouth shut and not provoke anything. Likewise Percy was silent, his gamble had not paid off, and he knew that he had picked the losing side. Harry tried to feel hate for his unofficial brother, but he was so tired right now, magically, mentally, physically, and most of all: emotionally. He had been tired before, but never this tired. Here was the moment he had dreamed about for years, killing Voldemort,

but all he could think about was how he just didn't care about anything anymore.

He looked down on the ground by his feet, and saw Voldemort's pistol.....the one he had broken the code with, something only one wizard (Grindewald) had done in over 400 years. This was so like evil, and so like Voldemort. He stared at the gun and thought of how quick it would be, how convenient.....and who would care about a code if he was gone? His wands were not in hand, they had been picked up by the twins for safekeeping.....but his right hand was flexing, almost like he wanted to feel it in his hand.....and the gun started to vibrate a little, it started to move.....like it too wanted Harry to grasp it.....

But it was not to be. Freygang had watched all of this play out, knowing exactly what Harry wanted to do..... and while the lad's purpose had technically been served, he liked the kid, and knew that his father did as well.....so he walked over the gun and pocketed it.

"You don't mind if I take this as souvenir, do you Harry Potter?" He said this matter of factly, and in a normal tone of voice, but it was enough to snap Harry out of his trance, and he shook his head that he didn't mind.

"Good, I have a nice collection of them, though I've never used one myself. You did well young man, you did exactly what you had to do." He shouted something in Gobbledygook and his security force assembled behind him, and they departed the castle. Harry went over to Luna, whose head was being cradled by her father, and knelt down beside them.

"I'm so sorry Luna, I'm so very sorry. I....." He couldn't finish, and the tears started to flow again. Joe looked over at him and put his arm around his shoulders.

"My little girl was never happier than she was this last year Harry, and that's due to you. She loved you with all of her heart, and what's more she knew that you loved her just as much." With that, he picked up his daughter, and carried her away.

Bill quietly went over to McGonagall and softly said:

"Headmistress, perhaps you should take the castle out of lockdown.....we have some parents to notify. I'll help with that if you would like me too."

"Yes, thank you Bill.....just make sure Harry isn't left alone for one second, I think we all saw what he was about to do with that gun."

"I know.....I guess I can understand it in a way, if I had lost Ashley today.....We won't leave him alone for awhile though." After Bill whispered something to Charlie and the twins, he and McGonagall went up to her office, where they notified the parents of thirty-six students (Luna's father was the only one among the rescuing parents that lost a child) and the families of four professors of the loss of their loved ones. Madam Pomfrey had been doing a little business during this time, but not as much as one would think, since the Death Eaters were using nothing but Avada Kedavra, and the light side likewise were taking only two prisoners (Percy and Pettigrew), thanks to the goblins.

#### The Aftermath:

Speaking of the last remains of a 500 person Death Eater force, once the lockdown was over, they were quickly hustled by Kingsley and Biller to the Ministry, and thence on to Azkaban, where they would be safe from any potential rescuers. The Ministry would be cleaning things up for quite awhile, as every department had been hit hard by the raid.....the Aurors were now down to eleven, a small force even with the Death Eaters wiped out. Fudge and Bones both came to Hogwarts to assess the damage, and to grieve over those lost.....over 1/3 of the faculty, and over thirteen percent of the overall student body.....the floo calls took quite a long time, and parents began streaming in to take charge of their children's bodies.....as well as other parents who just wanted to make sure that their kids were all right. Dinner was obviously cancelled for the evening, and some of the House Elves brought food to the individual Common Rooms, while the rest of the House Elf corps was detailed with cleaning up the wreckage and fixing the front doors.....though

the front area where the juice had fired, was ordered by McGonagall not to be touched, as a reminder.

Harry was still numb as he allowed himself to be guided back to Gryffindor by his friends. Charlie went down to the Hospital Wing and procured some Dreamless Sleep Potion for Harry, and once inside his trunk, he accepted the potion without complaint, and proceeded to sleep for the next eighteen hours straight. The girls all went to Ravenclaw, to be with Lissa Turpin (who had lost her boyfriend Terry Boot), and the guys set up a rotating shift of people to watch over Harry, making sure that at least two of them were with him at all times. The first and second year students were retrieved from The Burrow, where Professor Hill had been regaling them with muggle legends and fables, keeping their minds somewhat occupied and distracted. A sixth year in each House was detailed by Neville to tell the youngest years what had happened.

McGonagall walked around later that night to each of the Common Rooms, and announced that classes were cancelled for the next two days, in part to lessen the shock of what had happened, and in part to find some replacement teachers for Defense, Arithmancy, Herbology, and Astronomy. Meals were still served in the Common Rooms on Tuesday and most of Wednesday, as the Great Hall was being readied for a large funeral service that was to take place Wednesday afternoon.

Harry and all of the other student leaders were interviewed in depth on Tuesday by Bones, Shacklebolt, and Biller, and their stories taken as a whole gave much clarity to the outsiders as to what had happened. Bones informed Harry that Manuel Zabini had just been elected to lead the Wizengamot, and that the body itself had been in special session almost non-stop since the morning, deciding what to do about the aftermath, and what awards to hand out. Before she left, Bones had a word or two of mild warning for Harry.

"I owe it to you to tell you this Harry, there is some negative rumbling in the Wizengamot about what you did here, exposing all of those kids to the Death Eaters like you did.....now I think you did the right thing myself, and I can guarantee that no charges will be brought against you.....not that any could, since you had the

Minister's approval for your use of the killing curse, and Biller knew and approved of the archer defense.....which was incredibly innovative I must say, and probably turned the tide. There are also rumblings from some of the parents of those students who were killed." Harry just looked at her with the same dead eyes with which he had been looking at everyone else since he had woken up a few hours ago (it was now 7:00 pm on Tuesday evening).

"What are you saying Madam Bones, that they might come after me?"

"Well you can probably expect a Howler or ten at the very least.....and yes, I think tomorrow you will hear some angry words directed at you.....but do not be troubled by it Harry, like everyone has probably been telling you ad nauseam, you did what you had to do.....and you did it incredibly well. You were the only one in this country that could have rallied your students like you did. Your kids exterminated two or three generations of Death Eaters.....everyone of whom deserved what he or she got."

"What's going to happen to Percy Weasley? And Peter Pettigrew?"

"They will both be questioned when we have more time, though Pettigrew did have a short session last night, and we rounded up all of the Dark sympathizers that he knew about.....and he was Voldemort's executive officer, so our thinking is that he knew them all. I will let you know of course when his trial is, we'll make sure we get him on the betrayal of your parents and the framing of Sirius Black.....in addition to his more recent crimes." After a few more minutes, she took her leave, nodding at Charlie, who had been watching and listening with great interest, having taken a leave of absence from the Dragon Preserve. Harry spent the rest of the day talking with his friends, and while he was still sad and hollow seeming, he assured them of one thing:

"Don't worry friends, I'm not going to do anything rash to myself, I've pulled out of that. I have a lot of people up there right now who would not be too happy with me if I came up like that." He spent some quiet time with Lisa, and they comforted each other with kind words and feelings about their departed loved ones. Harry was told by everyone that he was a hero, and while he didn't quite believe it (and never

truly would), his guilt over having the blood of thirty-seven students supposedly on his hands began to lessen.

Wednesday, June 3rd, 1997

The funeral service actually did come off without incident, each family with a deceased child had been talked to by someone in the Ministry or the Order about what the entire situation was, and while it did not sit well with many of them still, none of them chose to confront Harry that day.....other than the families of Terry Boot and Stephen Cornfoot, the only even halfway close friends of Harry who had died (Luna being so much more than a friend), and the Boots and Cornfoots had no axes to grind with Harry, their sons were leaders in Ravenclaw, and would have been at the forefront of any confrontation that happened at Hogwarts. Biller too made a point of harshly threatening anyone who might have been tempted to put so much as put a tickling charm on Harry, he stressed the point that what happened could have, and probably should have, been much, much worse.

The service was a four hour affair that honored the memories of all forty-two people who had died in the battle. Reminiscences lasted for most of this time, not just for Dumbledore, though his took up the most time, but every single student was mentioned as well, stories about how they had loved being witches and wizards, and the pride they took in their school. Harry sat between Joe Lovegood and Jacob Boot as he struggled with whether or not to say something.....and if he said something about one student, would other parents take offense? In the end though, he felt it would be an unforgivable insult if he did not say at least a few words about the kids and teachers who had followed his plan, to their deaths. From memory, he said the name of everyone who had died in the battle, and ended with this:

"Those names will forever be engraved on my memory, and no pensieve will be able to pry them out of there. They gave their lives to protect their friends, to protect us all from evil. I'm sure that I speak for all of my fellow students when I say that I will forever be grateful, and I thank them." Ron then stood up:

"Thank you." Neville and Ginny then did the same, followed by every surviving student in the hall:

"Thank you."

There was not a dry eye in the place after that as McGonagall, who had said things about every student and all five of the faculty, stood up one last time.

"I would like to announce that a memorial statue will be built right outside the front doors of Hogwarts, to honor those that fought this day, both the ones who gave their lives, and those that lived." She paused for a moment, and collected herself, and said something that she had been wanting to say to someone, anyone, for the last two days....and maybe even longer than that:

"And I would like to thank Harry Potter, not only for killing Voldemort and ending years of war within our world, but for his planning and conscientious care in making sure his fellow students had the best possible chance for survival. No one here at Hogwarts has cared about these kids more than he has, and that is why they followed him, to death or otherwise. They did not follow the Boy Who Lived, they followed their friend Harry Potter, and for that I honor him." She sat down, and Manuel Zabini stood up.

"The Wizengamot has been meeting for the last two days in special session, and we have many awards to announce. This may seem like a silly time to do this, hand out awards when such tragedy has occurred, but this is a time to honor the living, as well as the dead. The official handing out of the medals will happen at a ceremony to be determined this summer, but the Wizengamot wanted those honored to know now." He took out a parchment from his robes, and commenced reading:

"For the thirty-seven students and five faculty members who gave their lives on Monday, June 1st, 1997, and as well for the twenty-five members of the Order of the Phoenix who died at the Battle of Hogsmeade and in the Battle of Hogwarts, we award them all with The Order of Merlin, First Class (Posthumously). We further award

The Order of Merlin, Second Class, to all of the students, faculty members, and others who fought and risked their lives for a greater cause, with the following exceptions:"

"To Freygang and his force of security goblins from Gringotts, we award them their much deserved Orders of Merlin, Second Class, with special citation. Though their race was not officially involved in our war, they came to help at time of great need for us, and for that we thank them. May this be a harbinger for good relations between wizards and goblins for all time."

"To our thirty-nine student Archer Brigade, made up entirely of second year students, and two first year students, we award them all The Order of Merlin, Second Class, with special citation. This was an all volunteer group that was recruited many months before the invasion, and they knew what they were risking.....and showed astounding courage."

"To Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas, we award The Order of Merlin, First Class, for their tireless efforts in properly training the Archer Brigade, as well as their outstanding leadership during the battle."

"To Bill Weasley, head of the Order of the Phoenix, whose organization was vital to the survival of Hogwarts, we award him The Order of Merlin, First Class."

"To Ginevra Weasley, Anthony Goldstein, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and my own son Blaise Zabini, we award The Order of Merlin, First Class, for their leadership of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin Houses during the battle. Their cool heads and organizational abilities were crucial to the victory."

"Finally, every army needs its overall leaders, ones where the proverbial buck stops. In the army that defended Hogwarts those positions were held by Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Neville Longbottom. Their plan and leadership ended the threat of Voldemort forever, and crippled the Dark side of magic for decades. For that, we award the three of them each The Order of Merlin, First Class, with special citation. We salute them, and hope fervently that their

services in this regard are never needed again." There was no applause, this was not that kind of thing, but there was a lot of nodding of heads in the crowd. The ceremony ended soon after, and things slowly started getting back to normal.....well the normal routine anyway.

June, 1997, Hogwarts.

The rest of the month went by with few interruptions for our players. Temporary teachers were found for Herbology, Astronomy, and Arithmancy for the remainder of the year. The Herbology teacher, an Irish lady named Claire McDougall, was hired for the next year as well, with the understanding made clear by the new teacher that she would go back to her private greenhouse business in one year's time, just in time for Neville to take over. McGonagall, who still taught her classes in addition to organizing the search for new faculty and the preparations for NEWTs and OWLs, decided that it would be best if the Defense slot was not filled for the rest of the month, as the students already have proven to be quite skilled in that area. The sixth year members of the Executive Council provided Defense tutoring for those who needed it, and the examinations went off without a hitch.

The day before his June 10th trial, Percy Weasley was paid a visit by Travis Biller. Percy had told what he knew under Veritaserum questioning, but it was nothing more than what Pettigrew had given them under similar conditions, and quite a bit less. Percy had never, in the five months he was a Death Eater, operated without orders.....and since all of his orders were generated by Pettigrew, there was nothing new for him to add. Biller had ordered his people to keep Percy safe, and that he was not to be beaten in any way. The redhead had spent the last nine days contemplating things, and mentally preparing himself for Azkaban.....preparing as best he could anyway, the idea of spending however many years he had left there was not an easy one.

"Percy, I'm going to offer you an easy way out of the mess you've made for yourself, and your family. I like your brothers, and I want to spare them the embarrassment of seeing you convicted of murder and treason.....and I want you to be able to atone for your sins. This

offer is good for one hour Percy, and will not be repeated.....if you go to trial tomorrow you will face the full force of Azkaban afterward, and there are no Death Eaters left to rescue you. Think about it Percy, I'll be back in an hour." With that, he took a length of rope from his pocket and dropped it at Percy's feet, his eyes then looked upward at the wooden beam at the top.....clearly transmitting his message. Percy just sat on his bunk, not having said a word. He stared at the rope for the next while, and knew what he had to do.....

Travis returned at the appointed time, and the deed was done. Percy's trial need not be held. No one in the Weasley family had any public comment, and none of them attended his burial.

Peter Pettigrew received no such accommodation, and his trial was held on June 11th as scheduled. He was the only witness, and spent the entire day testifying about his Death Eater history. It was an appalling tale, and shed light on many strange occurrences. He was, of course, convicted on all counts (being a Death Eater, using countless Unforgivable Curses, too many murders to count, and the betrayals of Lily and James Potter to Voldemort). Minister Fudge, presiding over the trial, delivered the sentence:

"Peter Morton Pettigrew, you have been convicted on all charges. It has been decided by joint edict of the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic that you are simply too dangerous to be allowed to live. We do not want any flashpoints for other potential Dark Wizards, or allow you to be made of as a suffering figure. We hereby sentence you to death, to be carried out by the end of the day.....May God have mercy on your soul.....though I doubt he will." Fudge added that last part with a sudden tone of spite.

Peter Pettigrew was executed by the Auror equivalent of a firing squad three hours later. Harry was not present for any of the trial, nor did he say much that night when McGonagall told him of the outcome. He knew that he should care, and on some level wished he had been the one to do the killing.....but he was increasingly becoming bitter about the killing he had already done.....the killing he had really been forced to do, because of Ministry bungling and Dumbledore's own incompetence (or so he believed). Harry would go to his grave doubting the Prophecy that had changed his life, and

while he wound up (overall) with a very happy life, he still bore the scars, both on his forehead, and in his soul, for the rest of his days.

### Epilogue:

Summer brought some changes in the Hogwarts firmament. Professor Flitwick accepted the post of Deputy Headmaster without complaint, particularly after the other professors made a quiet plea for him to do so. Cho Chang, after not being drafted by the British Professional Quidditch League, accepted McGonagall's offer of the Defense post, having scored the top NEWT grade in her class, just edging out Jack Sloper. McGonagall had gone through the motions of offering the job to Harry, but as she expected, he turned her down flat (though politely). New professors were also found for Transfiguration (Alaina Newton, a 1989 graduate of Ravenclaw), Astronomy (Thomas Scheckter, a 1991 graduate of Hufflepuff), and Arithmancy (Linda Edelman, a 1987 graduate of Ravenclaw).....in addition to the temporary hire of Claire McDougall. Neville accepted the future offer of the Herbology position, and devoted his summer to advanced reading and essay writing. Since none of the new hires were Gryffindor alums, the Headmistress had little choice but to offer the post of Head of Gryffindor House to Professor Hill of Muggle Studies.

Harry took his promised visit to the Maple Leaf School of Magic in late July, just before his birthday. He was starting to finally pull out of his depression, with the help of some long, one-sided, talks with Luna at her gravesite in Ottery St. Catchpole. He decided not to work at WWW during the summer, as he did not want to be out in public too much.....though he could not quite put his finger on why really. He had gotten a couple of Howlers from parents of his killed schoolmates, but only those two. He got a few more from cranks whose business in life seemed to be criticizing others, and who probably sent out half a dozen Howlers a day (indeed, he told some of the names to Fudge and was assured that he got them from those people too).

He toured the campus and go to know the teachers there over his three day visit.....and the other teachers could instantly see that Madam Bonner was wooing him for the Defense job. Robert Cochran, who one teacher had told Harry was privately counting down the days until he could retire, sat with Harry for a long talk about the job, and

what it was like to be a full-time teacher. All of the faculty had read accounts of the battles of June 1st, and fully understood that the Harry Potter in front of them was a changed young man.

In the end though, after a long walk around parts of Toronto, and some soul searching inside of himself, Harry went to Madam Bonner with his decision:

"Madam Bonner, I will accept the Defense job for next year.....on one condition."

"Which is?"

"I would like to transfer and finish my schooling here. I need a fresh start ma'am.....I need a change of scenery and a chance to not have to see all of those reminders at Hogwarts.....they're like needles poking me and I can't make them stop.....I think if I'm here they won't be so bad."

This rather caught Madam Bonner by surprise, but the condition was nothing that couldn't easily be done. She did have one question though:

"What about your friends? Won't you miss them?" Harry had thought about that, but there were always the trunks, in theory he could see them every day if he wanted to.....and none of them would be shocked by this, Fred and George had each made a point before his trip of telling him to make sure to come back and say goodbye before he moved.

"They can visit as much as they want, but I think my future needs to be here.....or at least, not there. I want to be Harry Potter, seventh year student, not Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the defender of the light, the savior of Hogwarts.....those are nice in theory, but in practice.....they leave a lot to be desired."

"I can imagine Harry, I can imagine. Of course your condition is acceptable, I'll notify the rest of the faculty as soon as you have told your people back in Britain."

"Thank you ma'am, I'll pack up there and be back here for the start of term here."

And so he did, Harry wound up his affairs in Great Britain by mid-August and moved into a hotel in Toronto for the duration of the summer.....he would never spend another night in Great Britain again.

1997-98 School year:

Harry's move to Canada was not a great secret, but word had not widely leaked until the Welcoming Feast, when everyone noticed the person missing from his spot next to Neville and Ron. Much discussion happened on why he moved, and Ron got a week of detentions when one Hufflepuff fourth year openly scoffed about Harry's cowardice. The idiot's teeth grew back, but his nose was always a little off-center for the rest of his life. Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini were named Head Girl and Head Boy, and Ron was named Gryffindor's Quidditch Captain. His House won the Quidditch Cup that year, with Ginny as Seeker (she had won the Governor's Award for Defense on her OWLs), catching all three Golden Snitches. The new teachers worked out fine, and Hogwarts had its most peaceful year in quite awhile. Harry saw his friends several times a week, though he refused to set foot in Hogwarts Castle at any point.

In May of 1998, the Hands Across the Water Quidditch Game was held again, this time in Toronto.....and the result was quite different, as Maple Leaf won the game 250-230, despite Ginny getting the Snitch. The difference was made by Harry, who scored eighteen goals as a Chaser and thoroughly flummoxed Ron in goal. After the game, McGonagall again renewed her offer of the Defense job (even though Cho was doing fine), but was turned down. For the first time, Harry told her about his impending job at Maple Leaf, but thanked her for the consideration. McGonagall and Shepherd (the other chaperone) both noticed a calmness in Harry that they found striking. He was smiling easily and seemed to be quite popular with his fellow students.....but this time for all the right reasons. He wished them well as they left Maple Leaf, but he knew it might be the last time he ever saw them.....

In the ensuing years:

Ron Weasley was drafted number seven overall in the 1998 Quidditch Draft.....and by the Chudley Cannons no less. He married Susan the day after graduation, and wound up with a fifteen year professional Quidditch career, though he was never able to make the World Cup team for England. Ron and Susan had two daughters, named Molly and Lily, and settled into a happy married life. Ron never had to use his wand in anger again, and he spent his off season time visiting his friends wherever they might be.

Neville Longbottom took over the post of Herbology teacher at Hogwarts, and held it for almost ninety years, eventually becoming Head of Gryffindor House as well. He and Tracey split up soon after graduation, she not wanting to live her life in Hogwarts, and though he dated sporadically, Neville would never marry. He would tell the story of the battle if prodded sufficiently, but students learned not to ask too often. He passed away, in the middle of a staff meeting no less, at the age of 105, all of Hogwarts and Britain mourned.

Bill Weasley put the Order of Phoenix back into mothballs where it belonged, and never had to reactivate it, though he remained its titular head for the rest of his life. In the 2003 election, in what was considered a mild upset, he dethroned Cornelius Fudge and became the youngest Minister of Magic in British history, at the ripe young age of thirty-five. He and Ashley would have just one child, a boy.....Arthur Harry Weasley. His living namesake would be his godfather, and would have him over to visit every summer. Bill would serve four terms as Minister, before voluntarily retiring and accepting a post on Gringott's Board of Directors. During his time in office, relations with the goblins reached a new level of cooperation and civility, and would remain so long after he retired.

Hermione Granger, who had been in Gryffindor A during the battle and had fought very well, wanted to continue her schooling and enrolled at Oxford, breaking up with Colin in the process, as the younger man wanted only to be a true-blue wizard. There, in her final year, she met James McNally, a muggle from Edinburgh. They fell in love and got married, and aside from the occasional trip back to her alma mater, and the use of some spells at home every day, Hermione

Granger McNally went back to being a muggle. She would have two sons and a daughter, and none of the three would wind up being magical. Hermione eventually became a respected professor at Oxford, specializing in ancient legends and folklore. She and Harry had their promised lunch after Voldemort was killed, and they kept in touch for the rest of their lives, with a visit every few years.

Fred and George Weasley wound up selling Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in the fall of 1999 to Zonko's, for a full 1/3 of the new company, as well as significant upfront money. They married Angelina and Alicia.....but sadly had no children with either. They speculated that they may have prank experimented on themselves a time too many. Both twins were devoted to their legion of nieces and nephews though, and were the most popular uncles one could imagine.

After Bill and Ashley's wedding, Charlie Weasley began courting Katie Bell and they got married in the summer of 1999. They had a lot of floo travel in the first few years, as Charlie worked with his beloved dragons in Romania, while Katie played Quidditch for Puddlemere United for six years. After Katie retired from Quidditch, they would have a son and a daughter, Harry Arthur (reversed on purpose) and Luna Molly.

Ginny Weasley and Anthony Goldstein would stay together for another year before splitting up, with Ginny heading to America after her graduation. She declined to go for a professional Quidditch career, and instead tried her hand at becoming an actress. She never reached true stardom, but had a very healthy career on stage in New York City. She would marry three times, and eventually found happiness with Guy Statham, a fellow actor and closet wizard who she met while doing a play. Their children would be magical of course, and she made sure to send them to The Maple Leaf School of Magic. Anthony would marry Lisa Turpin, and after a long talk with Joe Lovegood, they both went to work for The Quibbler, eventually buying Joe out so that he could write his beloved muggle novels.....which he did, putting two of them on the American bestseller lists, though none of his work dealt with magic.

Harry started his new job the moment after his graduation, spending his summer preparing lesson plans. He did journey to Brazil for the 1998 World Cup Finals, and spent a fun two weeks there with Ron and Neville, the Trio back together again. Two years later, he started dating a 1999 graduate of Maple Leaf named Shannon Rohrbach, who had just been hired as the new Charms teacher at her alma mater. They spent a lot of time together that summer, Harry's first romance since Luna, and fell in love. They were married that Christmas of 2000 in a nice ceremony at Maple Leaf, with a large contingent of Hogwarts alumni attending. He never lost his love of Quidditch though, and was an instigator in the formation of countless pickup games. He got so into it that he made a 'for the hell of it' try for the 2002 Canadian World Cup team, and made the team as a Chaser, the only non-professional player to make the squad (and which required him to become a Canadian citizen).....and on a rain swept field in upstate New York in July 2002, Harry scored eleven goals in the World Cup Finals against France, with his old exhibition foe Seth Bullock grabbing the Snitch for Canada's first ever Quidditch World Cup Championship. They were cheered on by, among many others, Harry's wife Shannon, and their children, twin boys Ronald Frederick and Neville George Potter. They would have three more children over the years, William Charles, Ginevra Lily, and James Sirius. Harry would return to Britain now and again for weddings and funerals, but as stated before, he would never spend the night there for the rest of his life. Harry Potter died of old age on September 30, 2143, at the ripe old age of 163, surrounded by his loved ones and totally at peace with the man he had become.

The End.